

Greetings of Pahela Baishakh

Let's celebrate our cultural ethos

PAHELA Baishakh is back here with all the colour and appeal of Bengali culture anchored in history and tradition. The day is celebrative in a truly festive mould with people rollicking on the streets of Dhaka, and elsewhere in the country, to welcome the Bengali New Year. It is an expression of their yearning not to be cut off from the roots but to renew their faith in them.

The vivacity and liveliness of the spring, the season of flowers, are reflected in the way the day is celebrated as women attired in white-red sarees and men wearing colourful panjabees come out on the streets, away from the drudgery of life. On this particular occasion the streets of Dhaka belong to the people at large, a short-lived egalitarian phenomenon. The delight is shared by all and sundry and followers of all religions. That is a unique aspect of the occasion; it reminds us of the dim and distant past when social and communal harmony was the order of the day.

Pahela Baishakh has a great significance for traders and business community as a whole. To them, it is a fresh beginning marked through inviting friends and well wishers, as they open the ledger for the new year popularly known as 'halkhata'. So, Pahela Baishakh leaves behind all that is stale and worn-out. And Tagore's famous song "Esho hey Baishakh, Esho, Esho" delivers the message in a most emphatic manner. It is time to look forward with great optimism, forgetting the past and dispatching all that is outdated and outmoded to history.

The day is actually rooted in the agro-based rural society where the Bengali year was counted as the crop year. It dates back to the times when agriculture was the lone source of survival of the people. Today in an urban setting, however, people are content to celebrate it as a social festival.

The day has assumed even greater significance as some religious bigots oppose the celebrations on the most inexplicable plea of those being anti-religion. The scars of the Ramna Batamul tragedy will never be obliterated from our collective psyche. A social resistance against such monstrous attitude to our pristine culture has to be organised to guarantee our cultural freedom and no occasion is better suited to express our solidarity with the people's cultural rights than Pahela Baishakh.

Shuvo Nababarsha.

JWG on counterterrorism

We need to learn from others' experience to perfect the mechanism

THE government is thinking of setting up joint working groups (JWG) on counterterrorism with some countries, and towards that end has already decided in principle to form a JWG with the UK. An MOU will be signed between the two countries during the visit of the UK Permanent Undersecretary on security and counterterrorism, next month.

One recalls the comments of the UK home secretary during her visit to Bangladesh last year that there might have been links between terrorists of the two countries. So, there is a felt need for the UK and Bangladesh to work together to address the issue. It is a fact that the matter of joint working has been on the anvil since the time of the caretaker government, but for some reason it did not fructify. Be that as it may, the idea of pooling resources and exchanging data to combat a global scourge is an eminently good idea and must be welcomed.

There is no denying the fact that the terrorists have the uncanny knack of establishing link beyond the country's borders and often work to sustain each other; and it is a pity that states often flounder in their attempt to combat terrorism because of many systemic shortcomings that might be removed by having a JWG.

However, there are a few things that we feel should be borne in mind as we firm up working arrangement with another country. Bangladesh is yet to formulate its strategy, let alone perfect the means, of combating terrorism in the country. We are fortunate that the scope and intensity of the phenomenon are not what one sees in some of the countries of the region. While we must draw upon the experience of other countries' fight against terrorism, our planners must not overlook the fact that the causes of germination of terrorism vary from country to country, and therefore, the strategy should be responsive to these aspects of requirement.

One must therefore move carefully while embarking on bilateral ventures like that of setting up a working group with another country. There is a need, we feel, to determine the exact modalities and the specific areas of cooperation. After all, we can ill afford a situation that Pakistan is facing at the moment despite having worked together with the USA in combating terrorism. We can hardly risk the arrangement to go awry because of lack of mutual accommodation and due diligence. Before we finalise the matter there is every need to see how best the arrangement would serve our purpose without hampering our national interest and security.

All for a neutral legal system

Frankly, the right to dignity is one right very much overlooked in this country. Here, dignity is an enigma, a metaphor, determined by the kind of work you do and the kind of clothes you wear. That is why a policeman dares to slap in public a rickshaw-puller who is sweating profusely under the scorching sun. So much for human rights.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

WHO would not demand a neutral legal system when there is a boom, or proliferation, of crimes of all shapes and sizes in Bangladesh? The legal system, a police station or a court of law, is the last resort for a victim of injustice, therefore, ideally, he or she must not harbour any fear while placing the complaint and seeking justice. But is it that smooth a sailing in this country? If so, then why do stories of unpalatable experiences of mistreatment in police stations abound in the media?

Why should the state of things (like intimidating witnesses, lengthy trial, bribery, false witness etc) in and around the sacred precincts of law scare people away? Isn't this a civilised country where you have the right to justice?

In a civilised country you expect to be treated with dignity by the members of the law enforcing agencies and those higher up in the ladder of the legal system. They are under oath to "serve" the people of the Republic without making any discrimination. But, in real life, do we

get such unblemished treatment? Frankly, the right to dignity is one right very much overlooked in this country. Here, dignity is an enigma, a metaphor, determined by the kind of work you do and the kind of clothes you wear. That is why a policeman dares to slap in public a rickshaw-puller who is sweating profusely under the scorching sun. So much for human rights.

It is a widely held impression that more and more discourses should be initiated in and out of parliament on bringing about qualitative changes in the entire legal system of the country, starting from your shaky step inside a police station to taking your happy step out of the court with the certificate of justice. Is it too much to ask for? Ask any innocent victim of harassment (I don't mean politicians. I mean the lesser mortals -- ordinary citizens) and you will be given scores of examples of the ordeal they have to endure in their lonely sojourn through the "ghost infested" network of the legal system.

A sufferer will tell you why the entire process, beginning from filing a case in the relevant police station followed by

police investigation and submission of FIR to arresting and then sending the alleged offender(s) to court, needs to be made neutral, speedy, accountable and transparent. Because, how the complaint is written down in the police record book and how the investigation is carried out covering all the relevant areas, and in what language the first hand report is prepared, immensely affect the legal proceedings of the case in a court of law. If the investigator finds a "Joi Mia" in every case then we can well guess the fate of the case. Therefore, proper investigation and honest FIR are the least one can expect from a police force to ensure one's right to justice.

It is an open secret now that blatant politicisation of the legal system, except in case of some rare "diehard" people still holding on to the quaint ideals of integrity and morality, has made it weak, partisan and controversial. The "ghosts" of the political parties continue to haunt the corridors of the system. Despite numerous discourses on the subject, the corrupt elements in the country's political system have been successful in infiltrating into the sacred arena of law and justice, thereby weakening the foundation of the last fortress of hope of the victims of oppression. Pitiably, the legal system itself has largely become a source of oppression for the weak and the meek.

Today, we watch with a sense of foreboding, with heightened concern, how the politicised legal system operates to protect criminals on the basis of their "identity." The people in the system are supposed to be neutral and are supposed to perform their responsibilities rising

above any fear, favour or prejudice, but in reality, they serve the interest of the government of the day, if it happens to be "their" government.

With such people manipulating the legal system from the helm, for five years a criminal can do anything, from looting, encroachment, smuggling to rape and murder, and stay away from jail. All he has to do is show the identity card of a political party or some powerful groups with lots of clout. In the past, politicians unabashedly tampered with the country's laws and turned good laws into bad laws, particularly those used for trying corruption and encroachment charges. They created numerous loopholes in those laws and added clauses and sub-clauses to suit their purpose. They no doubt enjoyed the benefits of this later.

Today, because of such flawed laws, we see almost all the smugglers, encroachers, plunderers, murderers and thugs openly walking the streets on bail. And I have this uncanny feeling that they somehow know they will never go back to the prisons. That is why they feel no remorse or shame while appearing on TV talk shows to give sermons to the people of this country.

As an epilogue I would say that if we do not make the legal system neutral and people-friendly, corrupt elements would go about browbeating us with impunity. In such a fearful ambience no development will be meaningful, and we shall continue to sink in an abyss of social anarchy.

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A house of discord, not an apple of discord

Looking from the legal point of view, the move may not have been without a plausible ground. It is incumbent upon a government to recover valuable state property and put the record straight. Strictly arguing, a wrong ought not to be perpetuated as a bad precedent.

MD. ALI AKBAR

WE have had dismaying instances of non-issues attracting greater attention than the many burning issues besetting us. This time we have another non-issue of sorts, if one can call it so from a national viewpoint, which is going to engage us until when we do not know.

The issue (?) is about cancellation of the "one-taka lease" of Begum Zia's Dhaka cantonment house. The government says it has had to cancel the lease, as it does not have any legal basis.

Some government high-ups have cited two main reasons, one of them being the abuse of the house for political and commercial purposes in violation of Cantonment Board rules, and the other the illegality as per the Rajuk Act of allotting two government houses to one individual.

Looking from the legal point of view,

the move may not have been without a plausible ground. It is incumbent upon a government to recover valuable state property and put the record straight. Strictly arguing, a wrong ought not to be perpetuated as a bad precedent.

It is notable that the sympathetic, humanitarian ground on which the state property was given to Begum Zia does not exist now for the obvious reason of her family's possession of fabulous resources in the last 28 years.

Whatever the reasons shown by the government, Begum Zia and her party men cannot bring themselves to accept the dispensation. They have burst into a furious rage protesting against the decision, and are bent upon forcing the government to withdraw it. They even threaten a movement to topple the less-than-hundred-day government.

They will perhaps seek a decision in the court. One would appreciate them resorting to the latter move. While our

independent judiciary is in operation to safeguard the people's legal rights, it will certainly be the best of options to leave the matter for disposal by the court.

Once the matter is placed in the court, there will be little justification for BNP to create a tense situation over a sub-judice matter. Should they choose to make a fuss over it, more for political gains than for anything else, the people will be able to understand the motive.

The tussle centres on the legality or otherwise of the government's scrapping of the lease of Begum Zia's cantonment house. Here arises a question -- was any such sympathetic gift in terms of houses worth crores of taka leased out to any other slain army officer or political leaders' families? If it was, what happened to that later on?

The answer is not far to seek. A government house that had been allotted by president's order to the family of slain liberation war sector commander Maj Gen Khaled Mussarrarf was reportedly (Channel-I TV talks on April 9) transferred to two relatives of the ex-premier during her rule.

Besides, no such house was ever given to the families of the four iconic national leaders who were brutally killed inside Dhaka jail in 1975.

The allotments of the houses that were given to the two daughters of the slain

father of the nation were cancelled by Begum Zia's 4-party alliance government within a month of its ascending to power. Did Begum Zia's government ever care about the needs of the orphaned daughters of no less a person than Bangabandhu?

Some TV discussants suspected that the cancellation of the lease was revenge. Where did these elites hide themselves when the heartless treatment was meted out to the helpless families of the slain army officer and political leaders? Why did they not sound a single word of protest against the gross injustice done then?

That being Begum Zia's government's way of doing justice to the families of the murdered VIPs, what sort of a better deal could she expect from the government? If one does not show respect to another's need or sentiment, how can one expect the same from others?

Must not the security of the cantonment come into reckoning first? I earnestly hope that it will also be in the mind of our responsible leader of the opposition in parliament. She can afford to give up her claim. Let the "house of discord" be returned to the state rather than kept hanging like an apple of discord.

Md. Ali Akbar is a Deputy Secretary.

Is Robert Gates a genius?

Coming up next for Gates is the Quadrennial Defence Review. He should take the opportunity -- his last one to leave a long legacy -- and move the United States toward a military strategy that is shaped by the world we actually inhabit. That would make him a true genius.

FAREED ZAKARIA

WHEN a true genius appears, the English satirist Jonathan Swift wrote, "you may know him by this sign; that all the dunces are in confederacy against him." Genius might be a bit much as a description of the secretary of defence, but Robert Gates's budget proposal has certainly gathered all the right opponents.

There are the defence contractors, worried that decades of fraudulent accounting are coming to a halt; the Beltway consultants for whom the war on terror has been a bonanza; the armed services, which have gotten used to having every fantasy funded; and the congressmen who protect all this institutionalised corruption just to make sure they keep jobs in their state.

If you're wondering where to come down on the Gates plan, here's a simple guide: John McCain, the most thoughtful, reform-minded legislator on military issues, "strongly supports" it. Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe -- who has compared the EPA to the Gestapo, Carol Browner to Tokyo Rose and environmen-

talists to the Third Reich -- warns that it will lead to the "disarming of America." You choose.

In recent decades, defence budgeting has existed in a dreamland, where ever-more-elaborate weapons are built without regard to enemies, costs or trade-offs. In 2008, the General Accounting Office said cost overruns for the Pentagon's 95 biggest weapons programs -- just the overruns! -- added up to \$300 billion.

The system has become so pervasive and entrenched that most people no longer bother to get outraged.

The endless flow of cash from the taxpayer has prevented strategic thought. Much of the Pentagon budget is based on wish lists from the services, often lists that were conceived during the Cold War.

The air force developed such a strong attachment to its F-22 fighter-plane program that it failed to notice that the Soviet Union had collapsed and no great-power rival was around to get into dogfights with the US military. We're fighting two wars right now, and not one of the 135 or so F-22s that we already have is being used in either theatre.

If you're wondering why the program is

still around, here's one reason; its manufacture has been spread across 44 states.

Gates also trims the navy's wish list, cutting its destroyer program. But here his ambition suddenly dried up. He did propose that the United States scale back one of its aircraft-carrier groups, going from 11 to 10 -- but it will happen 31 years from now! Even so, of course, he faces the usual conservative opposition. The Wall Street Journal worries that a 300-ship navy is "perilously small."

In the recent clash with Somali pirates, it points out that US warships were "hours away." Well, if you've travelled by sea, you'll know that ships move slower than planes. Given the vastness of the oceans, the fact that American naval vessels could reach a relatively non-strategic location within a few hours is actually a sign of the incredible reach of the navy, not the opposite.

Gates has really just begun a much-needed process of rethinking American defence strategy after the Cold War. He has focused sensibly on the wars we are actually fighting, to make sure the military is equipped to wage them successfully. But while we don't need the F-22, we are still going to make 2,443 F-35s at an eventual cost of \$1 trillion. Do we really need those? What is the thinking behind that program?

American military budgets should be based on two competing imperatives. The first is that we are likely to be engaged in small, complex conflicts with much weaker opponents in difficult terrain. In other words, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Gates budget makes intelligent

provision for these kinds of wars -- in which manpower and intelligence are key. The second requirement is deterrence. The US military protects global sea-lanes and, in a general sense, preserves the peace.

If the Somali pirates were to cause too much trouble, eventually it would be the United States military that would help tackle them. If the Chinese were considering offensive actions in Asia, it is the American response that would make them cautious.

But these imperatives can surely be satisfied with a military that is leaner, more cost-effective, more efficient, and does keep somewhere in mind the capacity of potential adversaries. The US Navy has 11 aircraft-carrier groups. China has zero.

The US defence budget for 2009 is \$655 billion. China's is \$70 billion, Russia's is \$50 billion. America's cumulative cost overruns add up to more than the total annual defence budgets of China, Russia, Britain and France combined. This smacks less of deterrence and more of mindless extravagance and waste.

Coming up next for Gates is the Quadrennial Defence Review. He should take the opportunity -- his last one to leave a long legacy -- and move the United States toward a military strategy that is shaped by the world we actually inhabit. That would make him a true genius. He will certainly have all the dunces arrayed against him to prove it.

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