

Invitations farce?

Could have been a good opportunity to improve the political scene

IN a political environment as in Bangladesh, where politicians from opposite camps never see eye to eye, where the leaders of the two major parties never meet even by accident, where straightjacket mindset is the cause of the apparently unbreachable wall of mistrust between the two, many saw in the Ifar invitations the possibilities of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia meeting; and which would have been a good opportunity for breaking the ice between the two. At the end what turned out was invitation farce. The two Ifar parties were held in close proximity without either being represented in the other party.

It so happened that the two Ifar parties came to be held on the same day. One wonders whether choosing August 29 was a mere coincidence and whether or not the clash could have been avoided. We feel that in this instance the onus of adjusting the date fell on the BNP since the PM's programme as per protocol deserves and gets higher priority. It is customary too, we feel, to inquire into the commitment of the PM and personalities of the same status before finalising one's programme where one intends to invite her or him, if their presence is genuinely sought. It is quite another matter if the invitation is only a show.

At a time like this, any sliver of opportunity that holds out the prospect of a rapprochement between the two should have been welcomed and seized. This would have gone down very well with the people across the political divide.

We lost a good opportunity to establish a decent atmosphere for democracy when the AL went back on their pledge of giving the Deputy Speaker's post to the opposition on the excuse that they wanted to bring in constitutional change and have two deputy speakers and give one to the opposition - a very disingenuous way of retracting on a promise.

We had taken great heart when the PM announced that the BNP would not be treated on the number parliamentary seats. In fact it was the number seats of the opposition that has guided the AL attitude so far.

But the BNP has not lagged behind on their part. It has been boycotting the parliament on a very flimsy excuse. For a party that got 32 percent of the votes to become oblivious of that fact is a gross violation of trust of the voters and abdication of responsibility of representing them in the parliament. They did not think it necessary to attend even the budget session or have issues like the Tipai dam, the CHT and maritime issues, to cite a few examples, debated in the parliament.

How long will we be subjected to the old, destructive and senseless politics between our two leading parties?

Our vanishing footpaths and overbridges

The authorities must take corrective steps

THE images of occupied or commandeered footpaths carried by this newspaper lately are testimony to the misery which citizens often undergo in the nation's capital. One can put up a reasonable argument that the level of encroachment on public roads and streets has been of a mind-boggling kind. Worse has been the inability or reluctance of the city authorities to take the corrective measures that can help mitigate the difficulties pedestrians face as they try to negotiate the roads. In places like the New Market area, Motijheel, Gulistan and Elephant Road, not to speak of others, footpaths have as good as disappeared because of the rampant activities of hawkers. As a matter of fact, the usual picture these days is one of hawkers and their wares occupying entire pavements while pedestrians are forced to move, almost stealthily and in rather shaky manner, between running vehicles on the roads.

Footpaths are not occupied by vendors and hawkers alone. There are innumerable instances of individuals dumping building materials --- cement, stones, bricks and rods --- along entire stretches of pavements with little care to the discomfort they are putting people to. Despite the fact that roads and pavements are public property and therefore cannot be claimed for private purposes, there is hardly any effort made by the city authorities or the law enforcers to bring such lawbreakers to task. As if pavements were not enough, the foot overbridges in the city too are now home to hawkers, a reality that is a bad impediment to the movement of citizens. When you add to all this chaos the haphazard manner in which buses and trucks use the roads, you certainly know what pandemonium is all about. And let us not forget that every time there is a long queue of vehicles on the roads or there is a traffic snarl, some motor cycle riders think nothing of getting on to the pavements with their bikes and ploughing through, to the irritation of pedestrians. All such activities go on day after day and yet there is no one in the city administration to put things in order.

The problems faced by pedestrians apart, there are the problems which pedestrians themselves create on the roads. Most of them are prone to crossing the roads in ways that violate traffic regulations. Where there is a foot overbridge for use by them, a vast majority of them generally choose to ignore them. The result is jaywalking, which is a clear danger, both for the people indulging in it and for the vehicles using the roads.

Will someone in authority care to notice?

A Ramadhan of discontent

When the commerce minister himself had a forethought of the looming high prices of the essentials the public had enough reason to rest assured of a fair deal in the market, at least during the holy month of Ramadhan. Belying those reasons, the market has remained unrelenting, and the continuing high prices lash us with full fury.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE Ramadhan price hike was rightly anticipated by the authorities, and none other than the commerce minister himself announced a series of measures to combat it. They included the setting up of fair price shops, import of onion and sugar by Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) and market monitoring. When the commerce minister himself had a forethought of the looming high prices of the essentials the public had enough reason to rest assured of a fair deal in the market, at least during the holy month of Ramadhan. Belying those reasons, the market has remained unrelenting, and the continuing high prices lash us with full fury.

Even though the commerce minister talked so authoritatively about providing succor to the poor, at least during the holy month, it all drew blank. He could own or disown responsibility. He did neither. Ever since, he has remained silent or has shifted his focus elsewhere. And the government has also joined the ranks of passive spectators of the price terror. In the meantime, the abnormal prices of the items essential for fasting people continue to take their toll. The commerce minister has also suddenly gone

off the radar so far as the mundane matters like prices are concerned. Neither have the media outlets advanced any explanation about the failure of the commerce minister's almost missionary zeal to ensure price discipline.

However, after scanning recent newspapers and reading between the lines, some explanations may be available to the discerning observers. The food minister, while giving his view on the rise in prices, disclosed rather inadvertently the cases of wide-scale extortion en route before the goods reach the retail markets of the capital. He was, however, shutdown forthwith by the government's senior leaders to disprove the commission of such a crime.

According to media observers, it is the massive market manipulation by the traders that foils the government's efforts to bring about some discipline in the market prices. But, in both the cases, the solution lies in the government's hands. It's a convoluted riddle as to what's holding them back from protecting the common people from the market tyranny. Then there is emerging consumer culture, which is not conducive to egalitarian consumerism.

Take a look around you and at yourself. In the new consumer culture the poor are



Higher prices, fewer buyers.

further marginalised. The "turbo-consumers" that the affluent have become are more and more unwilling to embrace the socialistic spirit of living life. So the poor, the destitute and the social underdogs are always left in the lurch and unable to catch up with the affluent few who have no headaches about price hikes.

When the Awami League assumed power in 1996 with a wafer-thin majority in the parliament, it gave a good account of itself in terms of performance, achievement and governance. For a while, the country witnessed abundance of cereals, stable prices and market discipline. Now, with four-fifth of the majority in the parliament, the AL government has been stumbling practically on all fronts. What has led to this unsavoury performance can be found in a subtle difference. The humility of 1996 has now given way to arrogance, which destroys all wild-

ers of the sceptre anywhere. The AL, with its display of chutzpah, is showing the early syndrome of its self-destruction.

Market anarchy is indeed a product of "socio-economy" in our society. Now it has snowballed into a major crisis. Defying the market rule of pricing essentials on the basis of demand and supply some invisible forces have crept into our market system, with or without the knowledge of the authorities concerned, as the determinants of the prices of fruit, vegetables and grocery items. The government has to unmask this cartel and come down on them with a heavy hand. Unless this is done we shall permanently be hostage to their skulduggery. And the poor commerce minister will have to eat humble pie.

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Economic diplomacy

Economic diplomacy has to promote Bangladesh to mobilise investment, promote tourism and better manage national image. Investment mobilisation would call for a global presence of the competent companies or internationalisation of the local companies.

MD. JOYNAL ABDIN

DIGITAL Bangladesh is what the election manifesto of the present government had pledged. The people elected the AL-led alliance so that they can implement their pre-election commitment, not so that they can explain the meaning of Digital Bangladesh.

Digital Bangladesh is not an impossible goal to achieve. To digitise, Bangladesh needs a series of reforms in almost every sector. It should be easier for the government, enjoying more than three-fourths majority in parliament, to take for these reforms. The government has to utilise this opportunity to fulfill its Vision 2021.

To begin with, the government has to give legal validity to e-documents, e-mail and e-communication. It requires processing all files, barring the confidential ones, online, so that an applicant can know from the website which stage of processing his or her file is in, or who has it. All government ministries, agencies and divisions have to be transparent to root out corruption. It would require massive reforms.

But without economic development, Digital Bangladesh will not be sustainable. For economic development, foreign policy has to stress on economic diplomacy. To get a strategic platform to exploit the coming multilateral regime, Bangladesh has to prioritise country promotion and trade promotion, attract investment, and utilise and obtain technology -- along with managing better external economic assistance.

To attract foreign investment, Bangladesh needs to project a positive image abroad. Branding Bangladesh is essential, as without a brand image it will not be easy to get foreign investment. The government should promote the country abroad, which is the primary objective of economic diplomacy. The image of a country affects its trade, global politics, and international relations.

Economic diplomacy has to promote Bangladesh to mobilise investment, promote tourism and better manage national image. Investment mobilisation calls for a global presence of competent Bangladeshi companies or internationalisation of local companies. Bangladesh has to develop its

tourist spots and their infrastructure to attract foreign tourists.

To project a positive national image, the political leaders have to be careful about what they say regarding the country. They should know that the world media report whatever they say. Their statements can and do damage the image of the country. Promotional activities in the world media are needed to project a good image abroad.

Foreign relations, bilateral, regional or global, can be affected by a country's image. The foreign ministry, the embassies and diplomats of the country are responsible for the projection of a "correct" image of Bangladesh abroad. But their capacity to project a positive country image, or to change the undue negative perception, is limited.

The diplomats abroad have to be proactive rather than reactive. The foreign ministry has to give importance to promoting business abroad by promoting trade fairs, investors' conferences and dialogues between Bangladeshi and foreign investors. The missions abroad have to be facilitators of joint business councils between Bangladesh and other countries.

A positive national image can better promote Bangladesh products and services abroad and help create a brand image of the country's products in the consumers' minds. It would facilitate better market access. Salesmanship, networking and regulatory management would facilitate the export of commodities, services and projects. Value creation of products is essential.

The missions abroad have to identify the demand for Bangladesh products in the host country market and facilitate interactions between their importers and Bangladeshi exporters to promote export to that country.

A leading least developed country (LDC), Bangladesh should go for economic diplomacy to attract foreign investment.

Before the agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) comes into force to make technology costlier, Bangladesh should concentrate on obtaining technology for industrialisation.

Industrialisation will need infrastructure development, better utility services and other logistics support. All these require money. The government has to mobilise resources from domestic as well as foreign sources. The World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Aid for Trade to the LDCs, could be a good source. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, can also be approached.

Newer opportunities created by globalisation should be availed of, in order to achieve progress as other nations did in the previous decades.

The decision-makers must be pro-active rather than re-active in their action. Despite having promising potential for growth, Bangladesh continues to lag behind its competitors for missing out the opportunities and because of indecision of the policy makers.

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China and India will pay

Perhaps most ominous, the availability of fresh water will decrease in China and India, which is not what you want as irrigation needs also rise. Both countries get much of their fresh water, for agriculture and drinking, from glaciers on the Tibetan plateau and in the Himalayas, which feed the Ganges, Indus, Yangtze, and Yellow rivers.

SHARON BEGLEY

YOU can see their point. China and India account for 10% and 3%, respectively, of the man-made greenhouse gases now in the atmosphere, compared with 75% for the developed world (according to data compiled by the World Resources Institute). So why, they ask, should they cut their emissions of carbon dioxide? In July, an Indian official bluntly told Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that his country (the world's fifth-leading greenhouse-gas emitter) would not accept emissions cuts as part of a global climate treaty. China, now the world's No. 1 carbon emitter, has been less belligerently recalcitrant, but in a policy statement demands that developed countries "take responsibility for their historical cumulative emissions and current high per capita emissions to... substantially reduce their emissions" while developing countries pursue "economic development."

Read: no emissions cuts here.

Standing on principle is laudable, not to

mention catnip for domestic audiences who resent being told by SUV-driving Americans to cut CO2 emissions. But the stance has one little downside. A special place in climate hell is being reserved for India and China. That is, they will suffer more from global warming than, for instance, Western Europe. In part, that reflects the fact that nature always batters the poor more than the rich, as Hurricane Katrina showed. The rich can afford to move, build sea walls, turn on the AC, and buy more expensive food; the poor starve, drown in typhoons, see their shanties swept away in tidal surges, and die in the heat waves and disease outbreaks that will become more common in a mercury-rising world.

But India and China are also in line to suffer disproportionately because of how climate change is affecting different geographic regions. For instance, more of China and India especially in the north will broil (by which I mean experience median temperature increases of 8 or 9 degrees Fahrenheit) than Western Europe will, according to the

2007 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. As patterns of rainfall shift to more deluges as well as more droughts due to the when-it-rains-it-pours phenomenon that global warming causes, both countries will also suffer more floods. Indeed, China's south and west are already experiencing a sevenfold increase in deluges compared with the 1950s. And both countries will need to increase irrigation more than the world average of 1 to 3% by the 2020s up to 15% in China and 5% in India. Pacific cyclones are expected to become more severe, with stronger winds and Noachian rainfall.

Perhaps most ominous, the availability of fresh water will decrease in China and India, which is not what you want as irrigation needs also rise. Both countries get much of their fresh water, for agriculture and drinking, from glaciers on the Tibetan plateau and in the Himalayas, which feed the Ganges, Indus, Yangtze, and Yellow rivers. The Himalayas have been warming three times as fast as the world average, with the result that their glaciers are shrinking more rapidly than anywhere else and could disappear by 2035. The Ganges and Indus could become seasonal rather than year-round rivers. Water availability for hundreds of millions of Chinese and Indians is therefore projected to fall 20 to 40% in this century. Combined with an earlier spring snowmelt (bringing water when farmers don't need it), that could slash farm output 10% by 2030, projects the IPCC, and even more per capita. China is already experiencing its worst

drought in half a century, with 300 million people facing shortages of drinking water and 50 million acres of crops (notably spring wheat) lost or damaged. Overall, projects the IPCC, Asian rice production will fall 10% for every 2-degree rise in growing-season minimum temperature.

The wild card is how climate change will affect the monsoons, says climatologist Gerald Meehl of the National Center for Atmospheric Research. The Indian monsoon is born from temperature differences between land and sea. In summer the huge Asian landmass heats up more than the Indian Ocean, driving air masses from ocean to land and bringing pounding winds and the rains that agriculture depends on. Some climate models show that as global warming heats land more than sea, the Indian monsoon will become more intense. More powerful monsoons are already causing tragic collateral damage, killing 2,200 people in India in 2004 and regularly displacing tens of thousands more. The Indian monsoon has also been striking earlier than its historical late-June arrival, threatening to put it out of sync with crop cycles. China could experience the opposite: weakening summer monsoons as global warming alters circulation patterns over the tropics.

So, let's see: principle, fairness, and righting the historical balance trump droughts, deluges, and starvation. Really?

Begley is Newsweek's Science Editor. © Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.