

Antipathy to hartal must be made use of

Time for political parties to forge a common stance

THIS newspaper since its very inception has opposed hartal during the tenure of both AL and BNP. We observed with dismay how the AL and the BNP loudly professed the evils of hartal while in power but called for it when in the opposition. We would like to make it clear, however, that an imposed ban on hartal will be, if anything, self-defeating and counter-productive.

That hartal as a medium of political protest stands discredited for being overused, imposed, thoroughly repugnant to public sensibilities because of negation of free choice and, above all, destructive to the national economy is now a universally acknowledged fact. Historically, whatever rationale hartal has had as a political weapon against autocracy and misrule got lost through its abuse that starkly contrasted with the availability of the outlets for expression of dissent following the restoration of elective parliaments since 1991 and free play of pluralistic press.

The big misfortune for the national polity has been that while in the opposition a political party favours hartal, but the party in power abhors it, and tries to resist it leading to confrontation and spiraling violence. The opposition resorts to hartal deluding itself into thinking that even if people stayed put at home to avert trouble it would go down as a mark of success. And, the ruling party taking to street in consequence, a cycle of violence grips the nation. In the process, both the political parties stand to lose public support.

Not that they don't realise it, they very much do so; for, the Awami League at one time before election took a firm stand against hartal, and publicly committed that even if in the opposition it wouldn't go for hartal provided the BNP reciprocated in kind.

That being the shared legacies of hartals and counter hartals by the major political parties alternating between power and opposition, it devolves on them to first come into a bi-partisan agreement on the hartal issue.

We find it thoroughly unacceptable however that the ruling party in a one-sided bid has placed a bill in parliament to enact an anti-hartal law. This sounds as coercive as imposition of hartal itself, if not more. This furthermore betrays a sense of using brute majority in parliament which seems simply outrageous. The proposed bill incredibly seeks to punish individuals who force people to observe hartal meaning the pickets. What is even worse, top leaders of political parties who call hartal will be proceeded against along with the pickets.

This is certainly not the way to go about it. We are of the strong view that a national dialogue be held with all political parties including civil society leaders by way of eliciting public opinion to reinforce the already-felt need for doing away with hartal. The key element in the whole exercise would have to be provided by the major political parties to come together to forge a common stance against hartal.

Eviction of slum dwellers

UN official makes a pertinent point

UN Under-Secretary General Anna Tibaijuka has brought into focus a problem we have dwelt on repeatedly in the past. Her view that eviction of people from slums is no solution and that it is appropriate that those who are compelled to leave their shanties are resettled makes considerable sense. It is of particular importance that Dr. Tibaijuka chose to air her opinions following a visit to the Korail slum in the city's Mahakhali area. The visiting United Nations official speaks for all of us when she suggests that the Korail slum dwellers must be resettled in a designated area if the land they are now inhabiting is to be used for other purposes by the government.

In the present instance, the government's plans of constructing an Information Technology village, under the aegis of the Science and ICT ministry, in Korail have posed a clear threat to the future of the inhabitants of the Korail slum. There is no clear idea of where they will go or whether the authorities have at all any plans of resettling them. Such an attitude on the part of the authorities is regrettable, for the simple reason that those who inhabit the Korail slum have been there for more than three decades. Indeed, it is this whole attitude successive governments have adopted toward slum dwellers that has consistently raised concerns among various levels of society. While it is reasonable to argue that a number of slums have by and large grown up on government and other land and in unauthorized manner, it is true that during the time when these slums were gradually coming up and expanding, the authorities chose to look the other way. That said, there is the other side of the picture. Driven by a sudden desire to evict slum dwellers, the authorities have often turned up with police and bulldozers to remove huts and tenements and force their occupants off the land. Such action was not, of course, followed by any plan or directive of how and where the evicted people, hundreds in number, would be rehabilitated.

The UN official makes a profound point when she notes that the global body does not support arbitrary eviction. That is as it should be. Unless human factors are brought into the matter of doing away with slums, we cannot have a caring society take shape, especially where the poor and the homeless are concerned. Poverty and not the poor ought to be the target of any development programme. Where Korail is concerned, it appears that an overwhelming desire to promote the idea of a digital Bangladesh is being brought in at the expense of those who have always lived a threadbare existence. That is the saddest part of the story.

The authorities should take serious note of Anna Tibaijuka's views. Governance, after all, encompasses the welfare of all classes of citizens. Ignoring those on the fringes, sometimes in callous manner, can prove to be counter-productive.



Does the Foreign Office matter any more?

Worse, it will epitomise a Foreign Office that will no more be a sphere on its own but a department carrying out the orders of another, more powerful office which incidentally happens to be in the hands of the prime minister. And all this will amount to something of the bizarre in the conduct of Bangladesh's foreign policy abroad.

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IF it is true that henceforth it will be the Cabinet Division which will vet and approve all ambassadorial appointments, we have good reason to be alarmed. And that will be because it will mean that the Foreign Office has been stripped of its authority to choose the men and women it would like to represent the country abroad to the highest or most enlightened degree possible.

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Before you move on, though, reflect on that small matter of a foreign policy. Do we have a foreign policy at all? Or does our poverty preclude any diplomatic thoughts we may have in our dealings with the world beyond our frontiers?

These are questions no one has

answered, and not just in the brief period the Awami League government has been in office. Indeed, a growing proclivity on the part of those in the corridors of power appears to be to either ignore the Foreign Office altogether or simply to run it down.

As for the Foreign Office itself, it does not appear to promise anything of the vibrant and the suave where the question is one of Bangladesh's future diplomacy. The general feeling being that there has been a qualitative decline in the nation's diplomatic intake over the past many years, there is precious little we can look forward to in the times ahead. That little idea we have known as initiative, or call it intellectual drive, has been missing for a long time.

But, of course, to have an organisation operate on sheer energy you need equally enlightened and energetic leadership. The Foreign Office has not been privy to such leadership for a very long time. Hope flickered when Abul Hasan Chowdhury served the nation as minister of state for foreign affairs. But, then, the foreign minister at the time made sure that his deputy got nowhere. That was a tragedy.

Call it the bizarre. Call it tragedy. The Foreign Office has been going through it all. Superannuated military officers and partisan politicians have all been dumped into it, the better for these people to be sent abroad as ambassadors or high commissioners. Few, if any, of these men and women have convinced us that they have done any good for the country.

As a matter of fact, the scandalous has sometimes come about in the way Bengali diplomats, career foreign service officers or those imposed on Shegun Bagicha, have gone about their job. Not long ago, our newly appointed ambassador in Egypt and his deputy were recalled home, so the whispering ones say, for reasons that had everything to do with financial irregularities. No one has informed the country what went wrong or what measures are underway to take these men to task.

But, again, must we complain? Over the years, audit teams making a tour of Bangladesh's missions abroad have come away with dossiers prepared on everything that has been going wrong there. In how many instances have we observed action taken?

The Foreign Office, in a blunt manner of speaking, has been limping for a very long time. That ought not to have been the reality, given that there is a foreign service training academy whose job is to prepare young diplomats for service abroad. And yet there comes this rather cynical question; what will such training amount to if it is generally superannuated diplomats who are brought in on a contractual basis to man some of the more important missions abroad?

When a government ignores men and women in service and goes looking for those not in service any more to serve it, it simply dampens creative drive all across the diplomatic establishment. Examine the appointments this government has made since its assumption of office sixteen months ago. Can you honestly say that our ambassadors and high commissioners in the world's significant capitals have made any impact on the countries they are posted in?

And then observe the sheer predicament we get into when a serving ambassador, having been given the position of a minister of state, begins to describe himself as ambassador and minister of state. How can you be a minister of state and not be in the country? If you are a minister, how do you happen to be an ambassador? Is there no distinction between equivalence of position and actually being in that position? Will someone in authority, preferably the foreign minister, get us out of this conundrum?

The clear bottom line today is that Bangladesh needs to ratchet up its diplomacy around the world. That calls for a return of authority to the Foreign Office. It calls for a reshuffle in a good number of diplomatic missions. Men and women with a sense of global history, with a clear comprehension of national politics, with an ability to lock minds with minds around the world must be tapped in order for them to speak for Bangladesh abroad. It is a job a purposeful and activist foreign minister can do. It calls for someone in the mould of Kamal Hossain.

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Can US withdraw troops next year?

While acknowledging setbacks officials point to positive signs, including the recent jirga peace conference called by Karzai intended to lure moderate Taliban out of the war, and his trip to the insurgency-infested south of the country.

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PRESIDENT Obama, while sending 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, believed that the surge would turn around the war and allow pulling out of troops from Afghanistan by July 2011. By summer, it is estimated the number of US troops will increase to 105,000.

The question raised in Washington is whether the time-table of withdrawal can be maintained given the situation in Afghanistan?

For now, it is reported that the White House has decided to wait until a review, scheduled for December, to assess whether the target date could still work. Meanwhile, officials are underscoring the fact that the July 2011 withdrawal start will be based on conditions in Afghanistan, and the president will decide how quickly troops will be pulled out.

The Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Afghan government are set to extend "Operation Mosharak" (meaning "together" in Dari language of Afghanistan) from Helmand into the adjacent province of Kandahar.

Kandahar is the seat of the insurgency, and winning it depends on the success of

operations in adjoining provinces. In the provincial capital, Kandahar city, very few NGOs and multilateral institutions operate because of the extreme danger posed by insurgency.

Kandahar is of the utmost strategic significance to ISAF due to its critical position on Afghanistan's ring road. The ISAF plans to create a ring of stability in the populous districts that surround Kandahar city by putting troops to restrict Taliban's mobility. These forces, according to a report, will be in place by August, and the additional 30,000 US troops will be placed in the surrounding districts.

Some concerns about the operations of Kandahar are described below:

- The inability of Afghan officials -- both civil and security -- to keep law and order after the insurgents are beaten. The local people get frustrated when they do not obtain amenities from the government officials, and insurgents eventually return to the area;
- After the defeat of the Taliban in Marja in Helmand province in February, Afghans and American struggled to establish a local government that can win the loyalty of the people to fend off the Taliban. However, Afghan officials rarely show up at work and do little to help local people.

Corruption, big and small, remains an overwhelming complaint. Under the circumstances, it is very difficult to depend on the loyalty of local people in fighting against the Taliban;

- In multiple firefights, journalists who accompanied the operations say that many Afghan soldiers did not aim -- they pointed their American-issued M-16 rifles in the direction of the incoming small-arms fire and pulled their triggers without putting rifle sights to their eyes;
- The real failing is the inability of Nato partners and allies to travel through the dangerous areas in the south and the east of Afghanistan, where the real centre of the fighting exists;
- President Karzai's abrupt dismissal of two senior security officials who were widely trusted by the US security officials;
- Afghans know that American and European troops will probably pack their bags and leave the country within 18 months and, given this scenario, it is doubtful whether the Afghan government can build trust in the Afghan people within that time.

General McChrystal, the US commander in Afghanistan, reportedly said in early June that operations in the Taliban heartland of Kandahar "will happen more slowly than we originally anticipated."

On June 16, General David Petraeus, the commander of US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, told the Senate Armed Services Committee: "It is important that July 2011 be seen for what it is; the date when a process begins, based on condi-

tions, not the date when the US heads for the exits." He said "rigorous assessments" would be made as the date approached.

Administration officials argue that there is mixed progress in Afghanistan and that it is too early to draw firm conclusions on the target date. While acknowledging setbacks officials point to positive signs, including the recent jirga peace conference called by Karzai intended to lure moderate Taliban out of the war, and his trip to the insurgency-infested south of the country.

Karzai believes there are thousands of Taliban members with no ideological basis for fighting his government. He called them "country boys," driven to the insurgency either by Taliban intimidation or by disillusionment with past government failures.

Riedel, the regional specialist, said that the administration had few attractive alternatives to its current course. Pouring in more Nato troops is politically infeasible (the new British prime minister has ruled out any increase of troops), while pulling out altogether would make Afghanistan vulnerable to Al-Qaeda in a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan.

It seems that President Obama inherited a disaster in Afghanistan and could easily end his first term with more troops in Afghanistan than when he began it. His determination to end the nine-year old war remains uncertain. Meanwhile, Nato soldiers are being killed in the south and east of Afghanistan (during the last fortnight of this month, 44 international service members have been killed, 27 of them Americans and 9 Britons).

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