

## CROSS TALK

### Opposition hartal call

*Maximum restraint is the need*

THE call by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies in the four-party alliance for a day-long hartal on June 5 only ratchets up the political temperature in the country. Coming on the heels of the prime minister's emphatic 'no' to a continuation of the caretaker system in light of the recent Supreme Court pronouncement on it, the hartal can only create new complications for the country. We have already stated our position on the caretaker system through this column. Where hartals are concerned, we have consistently advocated a doing away with them in the larger interest of the nation. It has long been our view that the most appropriate forum for a discussion of political issues, major or minor, is the Jatiyo Sangsad.

We feel that nothing should be done that can only add to the miseries of citizens. Both the ruling party and the opposition should go out on a limb to exercise maximum restraint in their pursuit of politics, keeping in view the overall welfare of a citizenry already reeling under a multiplicity of issues affecting their day-to-day existence. The matter of the caretaker system of government is a hugely serious one and we cannot afford to have it dealt with lightly by either the governing party or the opposition. Let the entire matter be placed before the JS and let the BNP join the session in order to advance its arguments in favour of the system. The people of the country must feel convinced that their political leaders are seized of the critical nature of the issues facing them.

We take this opportunity to remind our political leadership across the spectrum that in the past, especially when they have gone to power, they have drawn attention to the negative effects of hartals on the economy. The BNP was in power for a good length of time. We are certain it understands the blow hartals can give the economy. We therefore urge it to rethink the issue and consider seriously a purposeful return to Parliament in the larger national interest. Politics being a high calling, it simply cannot be left to the streets when a parliamentary system of government remains operative.

### Govt purchase should speed up

*Ensure fair price to producers*

LIKE in the past, this season, too, farmers are faced with a worry of being deprived of fair price for their produces, despite bumper production of boro rice. The problem has been further compounded by the delay in the government's buying the produce from farmers.

Farmers' plight is rooted in a multiple of factors. Since boro is grown in winter, peasants have to depend on irrigated water to grow it. Erratic supply of electricity as well as high price of diesel to run irrigation pump add to cost of producing rice. But the middlemen, who buy the rice before it is sold to the wholesalers, as always, cheat the farmers on price on various pretexts.

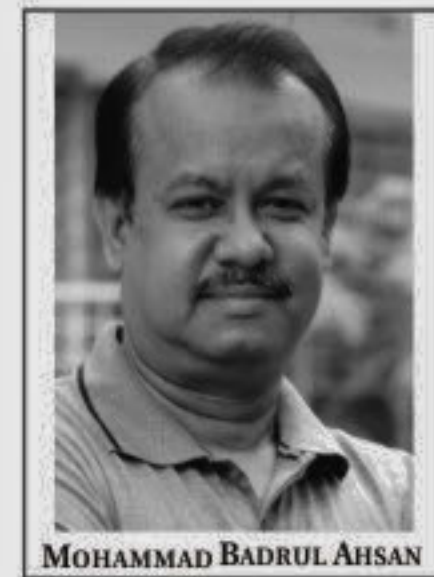
The irony is the market price of rice is still very high compared to what the farmers get when they sell their products to the middlemen or even the government. Obviously, the middlemen and the wholesalers mostly eat up what farmers could get had they any bargaining power.

Thus to get any return out of their bumper harvest, their hope hinges on the yearly government purchase of rice. This year, they were compelled to sell a part of their harvest to the middlemen as the government did not start the buying earlier.

Unfortunately, it has become a regular pattern that farmers do not get a fair price for their product of labour. It is a serious disincentive to them. And it seems, had there been any alternative to meet their rice consumption need, they would perhaps not go for boro cultivation on a scale they do.

To ensure that farmers might get due returns from their crop, it is hoped that the government would take its decision early with an eye to the harvesting time of boro. Power for irrigation has to be regular and cost of other inputs has to be kept within affordable limits. Last, but not the least, government should take some steps to protect farmers

# Khaleda Zia's stencil tour of USA



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**B**EGUM Khaleda Zia wants to return to power. Two times former prime minister of the country and the present leader of the

opposition is within her rights to harbour that ambition, and the way this government is progressing its course it's not unlikely that, if luck favours, her wish could come true for a third time as well. But her whistle-stop tour of the offices of US politicians and bureaucrats during her visit to that country last month has been anticlimactic. She appeared powerless in the pictures of those meetings publicised back home.

She met with congressman Joseph Crowley, Assistant Secretary of South Asian Affairs Robert Blake and a few other congressmen. But her meetings with them looked more like desperately hashed chatting sessions, more for photo opportunities than constructive engagement. Needless to say we cannot vouch for what should have transpired in those meetings. But if a picture is worth a thousand words, then the appearance of those meetings we saw in the national dailies looked scantily convincing.

While all these busy people mustn't have sat down for nothing, the pictures looked awfully vacuous. They appeared more like coffee klatches than bilateral meetings. That Khaleda Zia couldn't meet with Hillary Clinton or any other US politician of similar standing was

made sorely poignant by the pictures of those low-profile meetings.

Thus, this tour of Khaleda Zia is comparable to stencil work. The hollow stands out over the solid after one applies the pigment of one's imagination. Rule number one in image building: if one cannot show one's strengths, one should hide one's weaknesses. Those pictures shouldn't have appeared in the press. It would have been more

protocol disasters. We know how it works with the only superpower in the world. Its leaders have their busy schedules. They have their whirlwind tours around the world. They have to police the entire world. Their hands are always full with so many problems with people in power that they hardly have any time to spare for the aspiring returnees to power.

But that is no excuse why a for-

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meaningful to publish the pictures of the civic receptions accorded her in the United States.

In that regard, the leader of the opposition and the once-again aspiring prime minister has been ill advised. It is hard to tell how she must have been convinced to sit through those nondescript meetings. Not to say that posturing wasn't important for Khaleda Zia and her political party. But the second tier party leaders or her representatives could have attended on her behalf. She shouldn't have been dragged from pointless meeting to pointless meeting.

Because those meetings were

mer prime minister should sit with the bottom rung of the ladder. Understood that those people have the ears of their bosses. Understood it was important to talk to them to get the message across to their superiors. It works like that everyday. When the boss is busy, the staff attends visitors.

Those who took Khaleda Zia to those meetings should have known better. It is said that a person is as big as her standing. The converse is also true when the standing ought to be as big as the person. Matching a person to her standing is called protocol.

In so much as it's necessary for

our politicians to seek US blessing, the least they can do is maintain that protocol, or at least, a façade of it. The pictures we saw were devoid of either, and they made us wonder about our own standing as the citizens of a sovereign nation.

On May 25, when U.S. President Barack Obama visited the UK, Ian Bell wrote an article in Herald Scotland titled, "Why do we let a foreign power run our country?" Perhaps that idealistic question also resonates in many hearts around the world. But the reality is that they don't have a choice. It's one of the many elements of ontological despair that the strongest is always leader of the pack.

That is also a protocol unto itself. Yet the world revolves around unequal status. High has low. Strong has weak. Rich has poor. Big has small. What makes each graceful in its position is self-respect.

In that respect, Khaleda Zia's US tour was inadequate. It's not hard to tell what the purpose of her visit to the United States was. But what is the outcome? If it was an organising tour, it went well in New York though one in the Washington Metropolitan Area was mired by factionalism. If the tour was meant to earn American confidence, the proof of that pudding isn't in the eating.

If the idea was to kill two birds with one stone, it may have happened with a bizarre twist. It was a long and distant trip, which didn't go far.

The writer is Editor, First News and a columnist of The Daily Star.  
Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

# Dangerous decline of values

SYED REZAUL KARIM

**I**N recent times, Bangladesh has been witnessing a sharp and steep decline in social and moral values -- values that dignify and distinguish a society. Everyday newspapers carry series of harrowing, gruesome tales that were unheard of a few decades ago. What has happened that the Bangladeshi society is sadly sliding into such a social and moral depravity?

A homogenous nation as we are with rural root and common culture, the society is now in the process of gradual disintegration into a fragmented, greed oriented, selfish entity. This gradual degradation of values make our society less humane and we become poorer in social capital.

What is causing this slide? Is it the politics of hatred and confrontation and toxic relations between leaders that is vitiating the society? Is it the immoral accumulation of wealth at meteoric speed by some in the society which is spawning the seed of hatred and animosity? Is it the intolerance of social and political peers that is permeating into the social fabric? Or is it the oppressive poverty that drives people to the point of utter desperation?

We do not know how a sociologist or a social psychologist will interpret and analyse the phenomena. But we are aghast to notice the pervading cruelty and callousness, the deviant behaviour in the society. How can a nation be called happy and peaceful if everyday the society experiences gruesome murders, dozens of deaths in a series of accidents, multiple suicides across the country, violence against women, abuse of children, and vicious vendettas.

Rate of violence against women in Bangladesh, say the activists, is among the world's highest, and rising. "Everyday 17 out of 100 women become victims of violence at home or at workplace, and 25% of them die," says Rosaline Costa, an

activist (Hotline Human Rights, Bangladesh).

Figures released by Acid Survivors Foundation show that 338 attacks were carried out in 2005 throughout the country -- 50% more than in 2004. 41% of the victims were under the age of 18.

According to an official report, 3,401 women and girl children were raped in Bangladesh between March 1991 and March 1996. The same source reports that 1,843 women and girl children were raped between March 1996 and December 1997 (*Janakantha* March 28, 2008). UNICEF observes "child sexual abuse permeates all levels of

ent, frightened and alone." This is a condition of "normlessness in which values and norms have little impact and the culture no longer provides adequate guidelines to behaviour."

While we observe this sad spectacle of the society on the one hand there is on the other hand a corrosive culture that undermines the society. A section of young men and women are driven to drugs -- be it yaba or phensydyd or such other substance. The bane of this scourge is felt at all strata of society. The number of "clinics" mushrooming in the cities for the healing of such sickness is a testimony to that.

tion of being at the top of the league of corrupt countries. We may officially question the statistics but we cannot deny its disagreeable existence in the society.

Then we find parliament members abusing political opponents in the foulest language, and political leaders insulting the national icons -- the latest victim being Professor Mohammed Yunus, a Nobel Laureate. It seems we have infinite capacity to belittle ourselves.

The gross result of such social deviations is the loss of respect and values in the society for the persons who are to be held high in esteem. It is not that only individuals suffer in

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IMAGECOURTESY IMAGES

Bangladeshi society."

We do not have the figures of suicide on our hands, perhaps because suicide is self-inflicted and therefore beyond the purview of official statistics. But the number of suicides is staggering if one notices the news appearing in the newspapers everyday.

It was the French sociologist Emile Durkheim who observed that the suicides are committed because "some people lose their sense of belongingness, the feeling of participating in a meaningful social whole. Such individuals feel disori-

Another section of young men and women who go by the name of students bloody each other in their craze to catch hold of tender business, or they fight for leadership with guns and machetes. Criminals terrorise the innocent citizens for money over phone, invoking "Subrata Bain" or "Kala Jahangir." There is hardly any affluent citizen in Dhaka who has not received such a call in the last couple of years. There is widespread hijacking of helpless men and women on the streets everyday.

Bangladesh has the dubious dis-

the society; the society as a whole suffers, resulting in the gradual devaluation of social and moral standards. I am tempted to quote a few lines which Professor Amartya Sen quoted in his book *"The Idea of Justice,"*

"History says, don't hope On this side of the grave, But then, once in a lifetime The longed for tidal wave Of justice can rise up And hope and history rhyme." (Seamus Heaney)

The writer is a former MD of Hoechst Bangladesh Ltd.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 3

- 1098**  
First Crusade: Antioch falls to the crusaders after an eight-month siege.
- 1940**  
World War II: The Luftwaffe bombs Paris.
- 1940**  
World War II: The Battle of Dunkirk ends with a German victory and with Allied forces in full retreat.
- 1941**  
World War II: The Wehrmacht razes the Greek village of Kandanos to the ground, killing 180 of its inhabitants.
- 1984**  
Operation Blue Star, a military offensive, is launched by the Indian government at Harmandir Sahib, also known as the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine for the Sikhs, in Amritsar. The operation continues until June 6 with casualties, most of them civilians, in excess of 5,000.
- 1989**  
The government of China sends troops to force protesters out of Tiananmen Square after seven weeks of occupation.
- 2006**  
The union of Serbia and Montenegro comes to an end with Montenegro's formal declaration of independence.