

Why this new hartal?

Nation at a loss to understand

We are compelled to put the question to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its political allies: why a hartal again? The 36-hour general strike commencing this morning can only deepen political uncertainties and economic hardship for the people. What has happened since the June 5 hartal for the opposition to call for another hartal in less than a week, that too imposing an excruciating longer version on the people?

The reasons cited for this hartal mainly include allegations of unilateral annulment of caretaker system and erasing faith and belief in the Almighty. These are at best manufactured excuses. The Awami League has clearly offered talks for reaching an understanding and consensus on a formula to continue the caretaker system for a maximum of two terms. Secondly, the government has made it clear that it is for retaining Bismillah Rahaman Rahim, keeping Islam as state religion and even allowing religious political party.

The prime minister's offer of a dialogue, indeed her suggestion that the BNP come up with its own arguments on the caretaker system in Parliament, was indicative of the seriousness of the government regarding a solution to the problem. By dismissing all government overtures out of hand, the BNP appears determined to have its arguments with the ruling party settled on the streets. Such an attitude is ominous, for two reasons. In the first place, it demonstrates a degree of obstinacy in the opposition which can only earn opprobrium for the party. In the second, it threatens to open the floodgates yet once more to grave political instability for the country. By boycotting the Jatiyo Sangsad and by refusing to discuss the caretaker issue in the House, the opposition has been sending out some very ominous signals.

We urge the BNP to step back from the ruinous hartal course and test the ruling party on its offer for political engagement. The AL has already voiced its intent to politically resist this hartal. Thus, the portents of violence and confrontation need to be defused with maximum constraints applied by both sides so that the route to a rapprochement is not all shut out.

The BNP should not subject the people to greater hardship.

Indiscipline at govt. hospitals

An added dimension

PATIENTS visiting government hospitals have been known to suffer various forms of harassments. From getting beds at the hospitals to availability of proper food and services they are made to pay for almost everything. They are lured to private hospitals. They are sometimes forced to purchase date-expired medicines and re-cycled materials for treatment.

Now we learn medical representatives of pharmaceutical companies crowding different hospitals of the city to promote their products. We appreciate the necessity of product promotion and competition among the traders but the hospital authorities should see to it that the patients don't suffer for this.

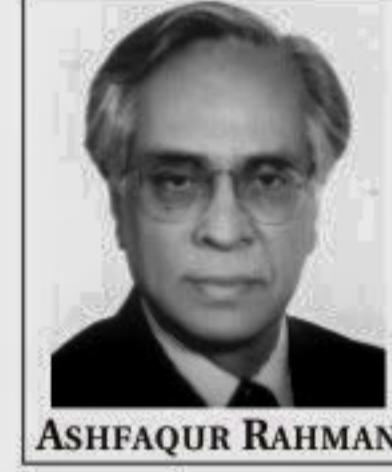
As it is, the patient-doctor ratio is far from satisfactory. Hospitals should have fixed time and dates for the drug promoters. Doctors must also be obliged to give their full time attention to the patients; they are expected to be highly professional and we believe many of them are, in their approach to drug promotion activities. They should spurn gifts to dish out favour to a particular company regardless of the quality of its drugs.

Hospitals doctors usually attend patients from 8:00 am to 2:30 pm and medical representatives are supposed to be allowed to see the doctors when there is no patient in his room. Most of the hospitals have specific time and date set for the drug promoters. It is only a matter of following rules.

So aggressive some of their salesmanship can be that even when their entry is restricted they allegedly resort to unfair means by collecting outdoor tickets as patients and enter doctor's chambers. They even dare check patients' prescriptions to see if drugs manufactured by their companies have been prescribed. Around 20,000 medical representatives are at work for 246 registered pharmaceutical companies.

It is the duty of the hospital authorities to ensure that the work of hospitals is not impeded nor the patients harassed in anyway during the hospital hours.

World Bank, know thyself!



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST Tuesday, a curious article entitled "How Padma Bridge will be built," written by Ms. Ellen Goldstein, Country Director, World Bank, Bangladesh appeared in this newspaper.

The article in no uncertain terms told us the following:

First, the people of Bangladesh are happy that the Padma bridge is being built.

Second, the writer tells us how corruption will be prevented while constructing the bridge.

Third, the World Bank has taken exceptional measures to reduce corruption risks under the project.

The writer outlines the anti-corruption steps being taken. The Bangladesh government will bid out and then award large contracts under the project. There would be a special prequalification and there would be a two-stage bidding process. There would also be strict mapping of individuals with access to procurement information. Financial and conflict of interest disclosure by public officials involved in the project would also be enforced.

Safeguard measures will also include bidder disclosure of agents, reinforced bid evaluation committees, strict enforcement of public right to information, an expanded grievance mechanism and oversight by an independent expert panel.

The World Bank will review all bids and would go the extra mile in inspecting, and audit bidder's accounts and records.

A project integrity advisor has also been appointed, who will report directly to the Hon'ble prime minister on governance concerns.

We are gratified to learn that the World Bank and our government have gone to such great lengths to put these fail-proof mechanisms in place to prevent corruption.

Congratulations and God speed!

But there is much innuendo in the article about rampant corruption in Bangladesh. There are suggestions that by supporting the project, the Bank is indeed doing Bangladesh a favour.

The Padma Bridge project is being financed not only by the World Bank but also by other international financial agencies and our own government. The money will be coming in the form of loans which will be repaid with interest over a period of time. Hence, our tax-payers should be made aware of how this massive infrastructure project of building a 6.15 km bridge is being implemented.

We are indeed in sync with the project leaders and our government on this issue. Finance Minister Muhith in his budget speech also referred to this enterprise.

But what irks us is the assertion by this World Bank functionary, that the Bank does not impose conditions that make it difficult to complete priority projects.

According to the writer, this is an "outdated image"

of the World Bank, if ever it was true, and is certainly not the case for the Padma Bridge.

But let us look at the World Banks track record on such matters.

The Banks' power over national policies comes from its ability to impose conditions on its loans. There are two types of policy conditions to its lending. They are quantitative conditions and structural conditions. In quantitative conditions the Bank imposes a set of macro economic targets like the level of fiscal deficit or the level of domestic credit allowed before any loan is disbursed.

Structural conditions push for institutional and legislative policy reforms like trade reform, price liberalisation and privatisation.

Before giving loans the Bank often twists the arm of poor countries to abide by these conditionalities.

At the project level, the World Bank has a preference for large projects like Padma Bridge. Environmentalists criticise the Bank for funding and overseeing such large projects in low income countries like Bangladesh as it needs to pay less attention to their environmental and social impacts. We are not sure whether adequate attention as required by international

norms has been given to these aspects while considering the building of the Padma Bridge.

The Bank's preference for large projects is also because such projects are profitable for multi-national companies. Such companies supply much of the technology and expertise for them. Is it going to be so for the Padma Bridge?

A prime example of giving a loan to benefit

multi-national companies is the \$2.6 billion World Bank loan given to the Philippine government for a nuclear power plant that was built by US firm Westinghouse, on an earthquake fault near a series of volcanoes, including Mount Pinatubo.

It is also said that the World Bank is used as a tool to pursue US foreign policy. The Bank fortifies strategic partners of the US and punishes dissident nations by using the grant of loans for projects. The Bank is also used by the US to integrate low income countries into the US dominated international economy.

As regards corruption and the World Bank, the story is intriguing. Most of the Bank's anti-corruption efforts are confined to high level speeches and analytical studies. The Bank does not address the risk of fraud, nor has it any accepted guidelines for project supervision and financial management.

However, Paul Volcker, the former Chairman of the US Federal Reserve and his panel who reviewed the performance of the Banks investigative unit in 2007 have given certain recommendations which are being implemented. The Bank's Board also approved a Whistleblower Protection policy in 2008. Finally, a Governance and Anti-corruption Strategy (GAC) crafted in 2008 has been progressively integrated into the Bank's lending and in its projects.

These include use of emerging good practices in supervision, monitoring and evaluation of projects. There is also a good practice guide to deal with fraud. Ten most red flags in procurement are also available to the Bank for its guidance. And this is perhaps what the Country Director is boasting about in the Padma Bridge project.

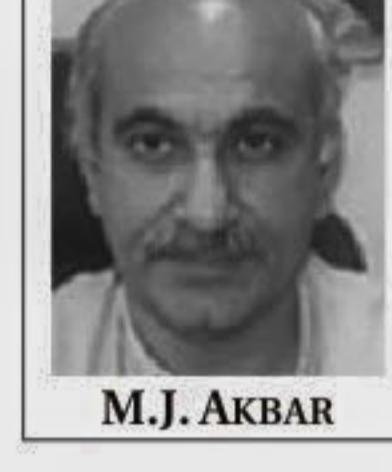
Yet, fault lines remain in the World Bank anti-corruption programme. The would-be whistleblowers fear risking their careers at the Bank if they report fraud. Again, senior bank leadership has not overcome ambivalence with regard to individual responsibility and accountability. Finally, the Bank's fund remains vulnerable to corruption because criminal conduct such as theft, bribery and fraud is not prosecutable by the Bank. We are not sure whether this has changed yet.

So the World Bank itself has still to walk the long mile. Perhaps through the Padma Bridge project, Bangladesh and the World Bank could share experiences which could stand in good stead for the management of projects financed by the Bank in the future. Good Luck!

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BYLINE

Beware the Ides of June



M.J. AKBAR

THERE is something about June that does not quite agree with Congress fortunes. On June 25, 1946, the Congress

accepted the Wavell plan to protect a notional form of Indian unity, only to walk away from its decision in a fortnight and open the party to accusations that may have become archaic, but never quite disappear from history books. On June 4, 1947, the Congress accepted the partition of India. Mahatma Gandhi, sitting in Delhi's Dalit colony, mourned: "Today, I find myself alone... (even Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru) wonder if I have not deteriorated with age."

Gandhi, Patel and Nehru would have got together to cry on June 26, 1975 when Mrs. Indira Gandhi imposed Emergency, and the country hovered in anxiety and fear while her son Sanjay repeatedly expressed the thought that dictatorship should continue for another two decades.

Maybe the old guard knew about the June malaise: Jayaprakash Narayan launched the movement that precipitated the Emergency in June 1974. Indira Gandhi's second terrible historic blunder, Operation Bluestar, took place on June 6, 1984. A closer scrutiny of dates and events would surely produce more interesting data, albeit on a sliding scale in descent.

The follies of June 2011 may seem squalid, particularly when juxtaposed with some contemporary characters

who have seized centrestage, compared to the great confrontations over nationalism, democracy and federalism in Junes past, but it would be a mistake to underestimate the fury that has seized Indians over black money and corruption.

A complacent and even arrogant Congress is showing every sign of doing precisely that. It believes it can mollify Anna Hazare and vilify Baba Ramdev just as it once thought it could ignore Anna and deal with Baba by stroking the latter's ego. This is a petty strategy for a profound problem.

Today, corruption is leukemia. The Indian is both awed by a figure like Rs.1.76 lakh crore, as well as nonplussed by it. It is so fantastic that it

Maybe the old guard knew about the June malaise: Jayaprakash Narayan launched the movement that precipitated the Emergency in June 1974. Indira Gandhi's second terrible historic blunder, Operation Bluestar, took place on June 6, 1984.

The voter is recording every scene of this volatile drama in his subconscious, and that montage will determine the next elections. History tells us that it is virtually impossible to defeat the Congress until it takes a very determined vow to defeat itself. Paradoxically, the problem of corruption is a consequence of success. Before 1947, the British did not need to ferret away black money, because they could pick up as much white money from India as they wanted. Empire apologists, or their Indian sycophants, rarely acknowledge the war debt that Britain owed India after

1945, and which it could not pay when free India needed the money most.

The black economy was a marginal fact for three decades after freedom, because when you don't have much of an economy, black economy can't be much of a deal either. In the 1960s and 1970s, smuggling was a theatrical reality for newspapers and movies, but it did not penetrate the bloodlines of the Indian economy.

Today, corruption is leukemia. The Indian is both awed by a figure like Rs.1.76 lakh crore, as well as nonplussed by it. It is so fantastic that it

This national fury has found a legitimate target in the politician, because the political class has outstripped all competition to become the most obnoxiously rapacious exploiter in modern history.

Businessmen at least provide jobs. Politicians fatten files when they are not fattening themselves. In 1739, Nadir Shah looted Delhi for three days, and we have not forgotten. Politicians have welcomed the 21st century with loot on an unprecedented scale.

It is ironic that this loot has taken place under the watch of a decent prime minister who has kept his personal distance from the sack of India. But Dr. Manmohan Singh's financial integrity is of little use to Indians when he presides over a cabinet weighed down with the corrupt. He refused, for years, to recognise guilty colleagues because that would have brought his government down, although he knew precisely what they were doing. This continues to be true. The current crusade is being led by non-political actors because Indians no longer trust their politicians. There is stain on every side. It is necessary to note that when they believe a politician to be honest, they reward him with re-election.

If 2004 was the best year in Manmohan Singh's life, then he might, when he gets to write his autobiography, rue the day he was re-elected in 2009.

The writer is Editor, *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 12

1964

Anti-apartheid activist and ANC leader Nelson Mandela is sentenced to life in prison for sabotage in South Africa.

1975

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi found guilty of corruption.

1990

Russia Day the parliament of the Russian Federation formally declares its sovereignty.

1991

Russians elect Boris Yeltsin as the president of the republic.

1999

Kosovo War: Operation Joint Guardian begins when a NATO-led United Nations peacekeeping force (KFor) enters the province of Kosovo in Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.