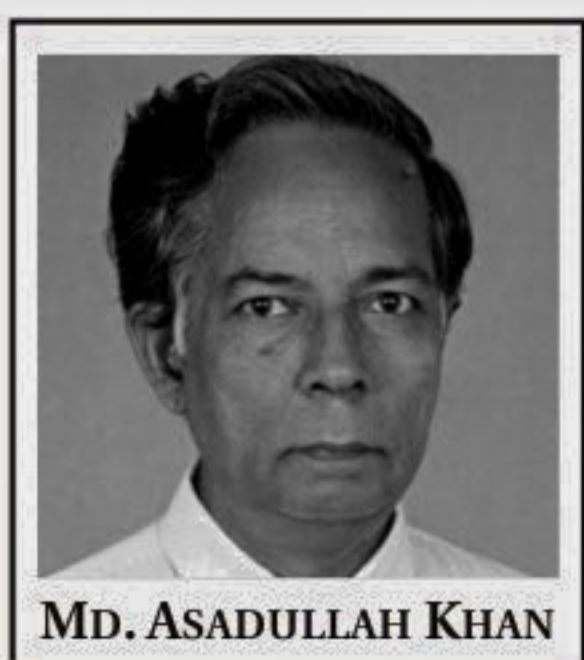


BITTER TRUTH

Pessimism grips citizens, sanity needed



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

LEADERS of the political parties are drifting on the tides, oblivious of the thunderheads piling high on the far horizon. Nobody realises that the country is sliding into a crisis -- the loss of faith in all. This erosion of confidence in leaders and politics of the country may be fatal for

our fledgling democracy.

The BNP-Jamaat alliance enforced a 36-hour hartal and has warned that the next hartal may be for 72 hours -- or continuous if there is resistance. So where do the people go from here? Political confrontation and unrest are what people are predicting if no consensus is reached on the caretaker government issue.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has changed her stance on the caretaker government issue and called to the BNP chief and parliamentarians to attend Parliament and place their formula on caretaker government. The people cannot understand why the BNP should be intransigent about attending Parliament and voicing their demand in the House.

The current of unhappiness runs far deeper than the normal ebb and flow of partisan politics and feeling usual in a democracy. This situation is a challenge to our politics and the inflated expectation it had stimulated in general masses in the earlier days. All institutions seem to be too corroded by hatred, intolerance, vanity, cynicism and intransigence.

Optimism has given way to fear for the future and anger at politicians who have seemingly mortgaged it for short term gains. The leaders have failed to take note that the engines of economic growth that had geared up in the early days of democratic governance after the fall of Ershad regime appear to have stopped turning.

The leaders seem to be blind to the cataclysmic situation developing around us, which may ultimately throttle everything. It seems that a virus of pessimism is spreading across the country -- a sense that we are seriously off on the wrong track -- and infecting everybody.

The dissonance that is evident in national politics must not be lost sight of. Both the main political parties are basking in their past glory, but the world around us has changed so much that we are now reeling.

While other Asian countries are taking a high speed train towards progress and prosperity, we are gasping for breath. People have begun to recognise that what they need today is not a messiah but leaders with acumen who can make a fledgling democracy work to their (people's) benefit. As the political impasse lingers, dithering over national issues goes on, boycott of parliament continues, the nation continues to slide towards a chaotic situation that will be fatal for growth. Admittedly, it is the economy that counts most in all matters of governance. All concerned must realise that if the problem of distribution of wealth and elimination

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KARI LEHR

of poverty is not solved, there is no way one can reduce or tackle violence.

In early '91 people were aglow with enthusiasm to build a country brighter in all aspects. But the euphoria was over soon after it began. In our case, the sunny forecast which should have proved to be true has given way to despair, pessimism, free-falling economy, and disarray across the country.

The opposition parties observed a 36-hour hartal centred round the continuation of caretaker government system. There are problems like corruption, inefficient administrative machinery, price hike of essentials and chronic unemployment plaguing the lives of the citizens. Those could be used as issues for jolting

the government. BNP even didn't say what was amiss in the budget: like cut in farm subsidy, which is likely to endanger food security as well as frustrate farmers and the sector as a whole.

The BNP and its allies may be thinking that if election to the parliament is conducted by a caretaker government with neutral persons of their choice, sans the electronic voting system, there will be no hurdle for them to swing back to power. No party, either in power or making a bid to go to power, should harbour any illusion that immediately after they have been installed in office, things will dramatically change and the country will be

will mean a change in style of governance. In place of Begum Zia's calculated aloofness and seeming arrogance, Prime Minister Sk. Hasina could be more transparent and strategically humble.

Happily, the just ended 36-hour hartal enforced by the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami passed off without major violence. With the unrelenting attitude of BNP to go for more hartals and agitation on the street, the people and the business community apprehend that the battles on the street may not be so non-violent.

Observers in the business circle estimate that the loss to trade and commerce in one day of hartal comes to about Tk.500 crore. Viewed in that perspective, seldom has this country so desperately needed leadership to steer clear of crises, doldrums and chaos as it does now.

Because of poverty and non-governance, the last few years witnessed disastrous upsurge of violence that cost hundreds of lives, a steady worsening of the economy and an unprecedented polarisation of the society. Political parties that espouse love for democracy, peace and stability of the country, as well as welfare of the people, must not only not indulge in rhetoric but also practice what they preach.

The message from all these ominous developments is clear; democratic norms are rapidly disappearing in the society and anarchy is gradually creeping in. Politics, as every sensible citizen believes, must be oriented to serving the people, lifting the masses from the depths of misery and working for progress and development of the country.

The most prominent casualty of the political bickering and animosity is the badly-needed economic expansion programme. As it appears, foreign investors and donors are wary of venturing into an inflammable area. Don't they (politicians) see that the turbulence will hasten the disintegration of the country's already fragile political and economic structure and inflict damage to the growth, or the very survival, of democracy?

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Correction

In the last sentence of the fourth paragraph of our last Friday's article titled "Maturity, if not statesmanship..." the words 'two years' should have read 'two terms'. The author regrets the error.

US foreign policy and Israel

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

US president Obama has adopted a new foreign policy to recover the image of US damaged by the Bush Doctrine of "might is right." The main objectives of Obama's foreign policy are:

- Maintaining US supremacy in world politics;
- Suppressing terrorism, particularly in Afghanistan and tribal areas of Pakistan;
- Continuing direct military support to Israel;
- Not recognising Iran and North Korea as atomic powers;
- Withdrawing the army from Iraq in stages and assembling them in areas considered critical from the geo-political point of view; and
- Monitoring developments in China and Russia and increasing strategic defense with India.

Obama's falling popularity has suddenly turned around due to the successful US military operation in Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden. It also exposed the role of the Pakistan army in the hide and seek game of

wealth in the area. Even China and Russia have strong interest in the area.

Needless to say, a cool or indifferent US-Pakistan relation will force Pakistan closer to China for its safety and security. Such a situation would be disturbing for US.

US is the world's only superpower. It is thought that China may challenge the might of US economically, politically and militarily in the not too distant future. Realising the reality, US considers China as her strategic partner. Furthermore, the EU countries are also emerging economically as a strong competitor of US. To be more prominent in world politics EU countries have organised a strong military force known as Rapid Reaction Force -- an all-European military force.

Thus, there may be four power groups and not a sole superpower dictating the world political scenario so that the world may become a safer and better place for justice and equity.

The common Americans want a sheriff-type head of the state capable of giving the country security. Through killing of Osama bin Laden Obama has been able to assure the American voters' security.

In a meeting held on May 19, Obama welcomed the recent change in the Arab world, threatening the fall of dictators like Gaddafi of Libya. In the meeting he spoke also of liberty of women and human rights.

Furthermore, his speech included the issue of Palestine-Israel peace accord. He invited Israel to discuss the point on determining the boundary line after 1967 war. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu rejected Obama's suggestion to determine the boundary line as existed in 1967. The liberals welcomed the proposition. Some others considered his proposal a political game show.

Palestine will get recognition as an independent country by September 2011. If the issue of inde-

pendence is not settled through discussion Israel will be branded as an illegal occupant.

Question has risen as to why Obama has taken the present stand about Palestine-Israel border. There may be two reasons for this, (a) pointing out to Israel about emerging crisis of US as the supreme power and (b) to please the anti-Israel powers.

A large part of US voters think that God had promised Israel a state. As such, no US president has the capability to ignore the interest of Israel. We have to keep in mind that Obama will have to be reelected by US voters. Whatever may be the interpretation of the political analysts of Obama's speech, he is the first US president to speak out so boldly and realistically on the side of justice.

The writer is a former Joint Secretary.

FAO and the promotion of universal food security

IGNACY SACHS

THIS article is intended to all of those who wish to contribute towards the fight against hunger in the world. I decided to write it in support of the candidacy of my friend José Graziano da Silva to the office of Director General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Much still remains to be done to ensure global food security. This will necessarily include reforming and strengthening FAO, as well as consolidating agricultural practices that are socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable, particularly family farming. To that end, it is necessary to enhance the role of national decision makers and ensure a more decentralized management, allowing countries to play a larger role in this process, notably developing countries.

Graziano has already demonstrated that he is fully capable of carrying out this task. As FAO's Assistant Director General and Regional Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean, he led the "Latin America and the Caribbean without Hunger Initiative," through which the countries of the region were first in the world to take on the commitment of eradicating hunger by 2025. He also played a central role in the coordinating process among FAO, the agencies of the United Nations System such as ECLAC, UNDP and ILO, and international organizations such as the IICA and the OAS. Graziano's career has been punctuated by actions aimed at rural development and the fight against hunger. Examples include the successful policies to fight against hunger and malnutrition carried out in Brazil beginning in 2003. It was Graziano who coordinated the creation of the Zero Hunger Program, which enabled 24 million Brazilians to raise out of poverty in five years and reduced malnutrition in Brazil by 25 percent, using as little as 0.5 percent of Brazilian GDP.

Brazil's history is marked by important contributions to FAO's initiatives. One important Brazilian in the history of that organization was Josué de Castro, who wrote the books The Geography of Hunger and Geopolitics of Hunger. The first was a pioneering study of the situation in Brazil and the second, an assessment of hunger in the entire world.

It is important to recall that FAO was created with the goal of ensuring food security in the world. Despite many efforts and advances, this goal has yet to be achieved. Sixty years after FAO was created, one out of seven people in the world still goes hungry.

This is the main reason why FAO needs to take on the challenge of totally eradicating hunger in the world through effective actions investing in resources aimed at promoting sustainable rural development and intensifying South-South cooperation as well as via exchanges and solidarity among nations. It is essential to strengthen family farming and public policies aimed at keeping farmers in the countryside; improving the production infrastructure; creating opportunities of access to credit, technical assistance and quality rural extension to produce and commercialize goods. It is both necessary and urgent to recognize the role of small farmers as the keepers of biodiversity, the integrity of rural landscapes and food security. These practices must be associated with increased international cooperation, particularly among countries with similar biomes.

This is the way towards guaranteeing the growing need for a supply of healthful food items to a world population that will reach nine billion people by mid-century.

As an accomplished professional and high achieving scholar, Graziano da Silva has all the necessary attributes to take on this challenge.

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AFP

Pakistan with US.

After the killing of bin Laden, Pakistan high ups blamed the US for killing Osama without their authorisation or knowledge. Pakistan said that it was violation of its sovereignty. Later on, it came out that Pakistan had some sort of informal agreement with US about killing of Osama inside Pakistan territory. However, the people of the tribal areas of Pakistan expressed their anger against US aggression.

Discussions were held in the US Senate about the future US policy toward Pakistan. During the discussions it came out that it would not be proper for US to sever its relation with Pakistan because of its suspected duplicity. Obama's policy never spelt out anything clearly about the deployment of the US soldiers who would be withdrawn from Afghanistan or Pakistan. We do not believe that US will give up its geo-political interest in Afghanistan-Iran area, because of the huge mineral