

## That decent act of protest

*PM's derisive remark unfortunate*

THE presence of a sizeable segment of civic society at the Shahid Minar on Eid day protesting against deplorable conditions of the highways nettled the Prime Minister evoking a flippant riposte from her. She mocked at the demonstrators despite their choosing a peaceful novel way to highlight a serious public interest issue. We welcome the novel civil society initiative.

Whereas the PM should have been respectfully heedful of the civil society voice aired on a festive day she ridiculed them saying how could they have known the conditions of the highways sitting at Dhaka. Could we turn around her question and direct it to her: how could she herself give a clean chit to the highways since she didn't see at first hand the wretched state of the highways?

It is commonsensical to realize that the poor conditions of the roads are so self-evident that they cannot be made secret of and therefore made light of, either. The PM may be self-deluded into thinking that she has made a witty a remark but that's not how it has gone down with the public. On the contrary, the impression has gained a ground that she is being poorly informed, and what's worse, wrongly advised.

In a context, where party men, cronies and leaders compete with each other to ingratiate themselves to the supreme leader, the test of leadership lies in taking cognizance of a critical voice. Because that makes all the difference between governance and mis-governance and credibility and alienation from the people. Particularly where the opposition boycotts the parliament or refuses to play a pro-active role in the House, the civic society and the independent media practically provide the government's links to the people on critical issues.

The culture of dissent is of paramount importance to a vibrant pluralistic democracy. The civil society is from where the critical voice emanates on issues, small and large, affecting public interest. We don't say the civil society will be hundred percent correct in it is views, yet it is a reliable reflector of a large segment politics-neutral public opinion. Rather than denigrating it, the government should be respectful to dissent in order to deliver public good.

## Developing human capital

*UNFPA executive director's suggestions*

BANGLADESH'S achievements in the social sectors have won the country appreciation. Dr. Babatunde, Executive Director of UNFPA, while citing this fact laid emphasis on human capital development without which population cannot be manpower. The focal point of his recommendation is that we set the order of priorities in terms of investment. If the country covets an ICT-based economy then education system should be geared to that end. We can take cue from the Bangalore experience. At the same time, it is crucial that investment is funnelled towards green economy. The education priorities will have to be attuned to both these objectives.

The overarching priority has to do with mainstreaming young people. The cornerstone of such a policy should consist in listening to the young ND ensuring their participation in nation building. This is easier said than done because their minds would have to be taken off their frustrations and anxieties. Their energy and potential creativity need to be constructively channelised. Let's not forget that many of them are given to drug addiction and violence. The problem areas will have to be addressed along with holding them to a proper value system.

We have to make sure they have access to build skills, credentials and education that connect to the society. Both public and private sectors will have to come forward with youth-centered investment plans.

Government policy should be focused on the fact that the curses of empty stomachs and joblessness will have to be overcome before we can succeed in mainstreaming the youth in nation building efforts.

Simultaneously, we should pay attention to empowerment of young women so that they can take their "rightful place in society," as the E.D. of UNFPA says. In Bangladesh we have already made substantial headway in woman empowerment through harnessing women in the RMG sector and involving them in a large variety of microfinancing projects. But we still have a long way to go

### STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

A distinguished academic from the London School of Economics while undertaking an evaluatory "reality check" of socio-economic upliftment programme funded by donor countries lamented about the acute shortage of public spirited individuals. Such individuals, according to the considered view of the aforementioned academic, could have supported, enhanced and sustained the innovative capacities of the ordinary folks who displayed commendable imagination and drive during the conception and implementation of development programmes. The absence of the public spirited, it was held, put an end to a good number of potentially beneficial programmes.

The important question is, why do we hear about the frustrating wane of public-spirited individuals at this point of time? The issue acquires significance in our part of the world where in the not-too-distant past there were many laudatory initiatives of local self-government and where the grateful public witnessed admirable acts of philanthropy and emancipatory ventures of public welfare by morally and ethically-driven committed individuals.

Reflecting on our sense of public duty one could perhaps say without fear of contradiction that we in Bangladesh have scant concern for public good and far too few citizens are interested in public welfare. In fact, our lack of concern for public good manifests itself in many ways -- in the way we walk or drive on the road and in more significant things like our attitude to encroachments on or destruction of public property.

The general reaction to numerous encroachments which are suffocating our cities and towns is governed by what is loosely assumed or hastily glimpsed or piously hoped. We have no sense of pride in our city, country or history. There are not many citizens who are ready to speak in support of public servants who are left with the odium of discharging their statutory duty of protecting national assets.

The sad part of the whole process is that we are as careless about public property as we are careful about our own property. Those who would not allow any trespass on their private holdings are willing to contemplate, with total equanimity, encroachments on public property and destruction of public amenities. Our urban existence is in a state of galloping decay partly resulting from public

property being encroached upon with impunity, with the misguided sympathy of a section of the citizens.

It is time to distinguish humanitarianism from miscarriage of mercy. Dubious public figures who have grabbed public lands are making large untaxed incomes every month out of the miseries of the homeless. The imperative of good government can surely be achieved by cleaner ways than converting public property into visible illegal occupancy.

There can be no two opinions on the fact that public interest requires promotion of law and order, not its denegation or destruction. Therefore when suspected wrongdoers are publicly lynched with or

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without the connivance of the lawmen, citizens are concerned. If the protectors have miserably failed to do the law enforcement, the enraged members of the public have, by their bestiality, also besmirched the virtues of observance of law.

One could ponder and ask why some people with good sense did not step ahead and make some efforts to stop the group frenzy? Is our bestiality getting the better of sensibility and propriety? Do we want to prove the cynic's derisive observation right that behaviourally Bengalis are individually cowardly but ferocious in group? Must not we realise that group frenzy or vigilante justice are manifestations of a sick society that is damagingly obli-

ous of public responsibilities?

A considered view is that for public-spiritedness to grow, the local government has to be entrusted with the responsibility of addressing a large part of our socio-economic deprivations; and they have to bear the responsibility of devising their solutions. It needs to be remembered that supersession in this regard will render their restoration and empowerment immensely difficult for painfully long years.

The possibility of contracting out aspects of urban services such as solid waste can be considered, and the scope of contracted out services be extended gradually. At present, our urban municipal bodies have limited management capacity and it may not be possible to put into effect regulatory systems which are needed to allow greater private sector provision of services.

The challenge is to find medium-term policy options that compromise between two extremes of inefficiency and the less-performing public sector, and costly private sector provision by individual firms. There is evidence that urban dwellers are willing to pay more for reliable services when available. Regulatory audit to assess the costs, benefits and distributional consequences of specific regulations will need to be carried out.

The efforts of communities and NGOs to provide services in the neighbourhoods should be supported. The local government institutions have to establish strong information and community relations units to work with the planning and implementation of machinery for dissemination of information to the public and seek community involvement in the decision making and development process.

Action has to be focused on issues that will restore the confidence of the people in the state without involving any financial outlay. People want security of life, fair-play and justice. They also want a rudimentary infrastructure and an enabling environment where they can work and prosper. A participatory mode of governance will foster public-spiritedness.

The blame for failure to develop public-spiritedness had to be shared by the people along with the government because politicians are voted into power by the people. It is time to recognise that private initiative can go a long way towards counteracting the deficiencies of the government.

We can certainly hope for more administration than government, more public service than public servants, more welfare than controls and more justice than laws.

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# Transit to India

The transit route plan is being stretched to include Nepal and Bhutan. It is claimed that transit fees from Nepal and Bhutan would bring good revenue for Bangladesh. But consider the facts: Bhutan's GDP is less than \$2 billion. Nepal's economy is not big either. Besides, their economies are inextricably integrated with Indian economy. It is unlikely that a significant volume of cargo from Nepal or Bhutan would go through Bangladesh simply because they don't manufacture that much exportable goods. In the proposed transit plan, Indian trucks would be allowed to crisscross across the sovereign territory of Bangladesh; while Bangladeshi trucks would have to stop at Indian

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border. This is actually an asymmetric connectivity scheme primarily for the benefit of India. China, one of our most important trading partners, has been kept out of this regional connectivity scheme altogether.

There are a number of bilateral disputes between these two neighbours; like maritime delimitation, water sharing of common rivers, drug trafficking, border killing, Teen Bigha Corridor, trade gap, etc.

Currently, Bangladesh is in a hot dispute with India over maritime delimitation of Bay of Bengal. In 2009, India and Myanmar laid claims on roughly two-thirds (37,000 sq km) of Bay of Bengal. Until the dispute is resolved, which may take several years, Bangladesh would not be able to conduct any gas exploration in 28 blocks of Bay of Bengal. We are still far from reaching a fair and equitable agreement with India regarding sharing of water of common rivers. Every year, Indian BSF kills, maims or abducts hundreds of Bangladeshes in our border area. Teen Bigha Corridor, water sharing of common rivers and other issues still remain unsolved

because of India's delaying tactics. It would be unrealistic to expect that most of these bilateral disputes will be solved during Manmohan Singh's visit.

Transit through Bangladesh, that India wants so desperately, is our most powerful and, perhaps, the last bargaining chip. Bangladesh should actually launch a major diplomatic drive for a comprehensive "package deal" with India. And in this hardball diplomatic bargaining game, transit may be used as the ace card.

One of the main objectives of the "package deal" should be to convince India to withdraw claim over Bay of Bengal and accept the "principle of equity." Water sharing of common rivers is essentially an ecological and environmental issue while transit is mostly an economic and strategic matter. Outright direct linking of these two issues may not be feasible; but complete de-linking is not an option either. Before we grant transit, a framework agreement about common rivers -- safeguarding our environmental and ecological requirements -- should be concluded with India. We should also insist on more river transit routes for India. This will encourage India to keep these rivers navigable year-round. India should be encouraged to accept the inclusion of China in the regional connectivity scheme. In return for transit, we may demand that Bangladeshi trucks and trains be allowed to travel to major Indian cities and ports.

We must now launch a bold diplomatic drive to use transit as the bargaining chip to solve the unsettled issues with India. We will, perhaps, never get such a unique opportunity again to establish our relationship with India based on fairness, equality and justice.

But, sadly, it looks like that a transit protocol is going to be signed anyway during Manmohan Singh's visit. A handful of our policy makers are furiously pushing forward the transit juggernaut so that a protocol could be signed in time. With the signing of the transit protocol, Manmohan Singh will certainly go down in history as the statesman who finally integrated NE-India with the rest of his country. The handful of our policymakers who are so thoughtlessly giving away the transit will also go down in history -- but on a par with Sikkim's Lhendup Dorje.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 3

**863** Major Byzantine victory at the Battle of Lalakaon against an Arab raid.

**1260** The Mamluks defeat the Mongols at the Battle of Ain Jalut in Palestine, marking their first decisive defeat and the point of maximum expansion of the Mongol Empire.

**1939** World War II: France, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia declare war on Germany after the invasion of Poland, forming the Allies.

**1971** Qatar becomes an independent state.

**1994** Sino-Soviet Split: Russia and the People's Republic of China agree to de-target their nuclear weapons against each other.