

## Hartal, again

*Why make the people suffer?*

**T**O lodge its protest against the government move to split the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) into two, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has called a dawn-to-dusk hartal next Sunday.

As a matter of principle, we have always been against using hartal to lodge protests, since it causes immense sufferings to the public and loss to the economy. It is not only the regular commuters, the day labourer, the wage earners, ailing patients who suffer and the economy is harmed, the attendant street violence adds to the damage.

The recent 'road march' programmes by the main opposition to drum up public support for its anti-government agitation programmes were being looked upon as a welcome shift from the destructive culture of hartal. The BNP deserves approbation for that. Now with this fresh hartal call, is it again slinking into that much abhorred and dreaded culture of hartal?

There is no question that the main opposition has its point in holding agitation programmes against the unilateral government move to split the DCC. It could well opt for demonstrations, public rallies and different peaceful programmes to drive home its demand. Does not this fresh hartal risk making a dent into whatever political mileage it had gained so far through its road march and other non-destructive programmes? It could also go to the Jatiya Sangsad and voice its protests against DCC splitting. In that case, it is not only the ruling party, the entire nation would have been able to know the opposition's viewpoint on the issue.

In this paper, we have expressed our strong reservations against the government's unilateral decision to divide Dhaka City. The government did not only fail to reach a general consensus, it could not also take its own alliance partners into confidence on the issue. It rode rough shod on the opinions expressed by experts, civil society and the intelligentsia about the decision.

Therefore, constituents from a wide swathe of the socio-political spectrum see eye to eye with the opposition's stance against DCC splitting. That should provide sufficient ground for it to rethink the unnecessary hartal of Sunday.

## CHT peace accord implementation still elusive

*Need for dialogue between indigenous parties*

**T**HE Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord steps into its 14th year today. Signing of the treaty was a historic move on the part of the then government that indeed brought about peace in the insurgency-ridden region. We nonetheless regret that the accord's status of implementation is far from satisfaction. This fact over the years has as well as creating a split between Bangalee settlers and indigenous people widened the gap between PCJJS and UPDF.

Such divisions have inevitably resulted in a higher incidence of violence, claiming many lives which is why violation of human rights in the region have become a worrying concern to different rights bodies. In the end, there are conflicting groups either supporting or opposing the accord.

There is no gainsaying that the government should not drag its feet anymore, especially in view of the rising social and political tension and should face up to whatever challenges are there in effectively implementing the accord. First, we think, the government should encourage dialogue between PCJJS and UPDF where representatives from Bangalee communities might as well be present. Secondly, legitimate demands of the indigenous parties must be addressed at the soonest and unanimous decisions reached to ensure their peaceful co-existence with Bangalee settlers.

As far as our knowledge goes, there is a general consensus among indigenous communities that the accord should be fully implemented to allow for rapid development of the hill districts. So the PCJJS and UPDF should hold dialogues for their differences can only impede the accord's implementation.

It was the Awami League that had inked the peace accord in 1997. Now that the same party is in power again, it must go the extra mile to address the legitimate concerns of the indigenous people in order that the unfinished agenda of the CHT accord's implementation

### CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam recently said he knew that party nominations were being sold for money. For all practical reasons he has put his money where his mouth is. More so in a society where everybody knows everything, but nobody likes to talk about it.

I would like to believe that the words Syed Ashraf uttered amounted to a Freudian slip. In 1901, Sigmund Freud explained in his book *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* that Freudian slips were errors that reveal an unconscious thought, belief or wish. Those who know the secretary general of one of the two largest political parties in the country also know that the man couldn't be particularly chatty. It must have taken an awful lot of political rage for what was hidden in the unconscious to get some vapour past his lips.

That somehow is true for this society as a whole. We know what is going on in the government, stock market, banks, customs, police, and in every other nook and corner of this country. We know political parties sell their nominations. We know

**I**T can be placed anywhere between a slip of the tongue and a purported leak when Awami League General

politicians make business deals and businessmen cut political deals. We know who is taking bribe, who is telling lies and who is hurting this country. But we do not have the courage to talk about any of these things.

One could perhaps say the same thing pretty much about everything else. The leaders and their cadres run this country because the rest of us like to behave like a fully alert mind within a vegetative body. We are not capable of as much as blink-

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ing an eyelash, let alone hoisting, a finger to register protest.

All said and done, Syed Ashraf's inadvertent blurting was window to a world where we are gagged by fear and apathy. What the British had done to us, followed by the Pakistanis, is what we have done to ourselves now. We have terrified ourselves, shrinking the spirit of 1971 into a nice-to-have souvenir.

Whereas three million people died to defend that spirit so that we could have our freedom. We were

supposed to be in charge of our own destiny, each of us being a proud king in the resplendent glory of our collective kingdom. But has it really happened? Are we really free?

That is why Syed Ashraf has also given us a peek into our own frightened souls. Even he didn't have the courage to give us more than a sneak preview of a horrible truth that is pending release like a raunchy movie failing to get the clearance from the censor board. Yes, that's what it is. We have installed a

censor board inside each of us that doesn't allow us to tell the dirty truths.

Many years ago the indigo planters, who were Englishmen, oppressed the farmers of this country. Nights used to be particularly dreadful because the sahibs could send their *lathials* to pick up the wives and daughters of the villagers from their homes. In the morning everybody knew what had happened but nobody dared to talk about it, not even the fathers and

husbands whose homes were raided the night before.

Has that ignominious silence changed after all these years? Each of us still suffers in isolation and in quiet anguish, but we are collective cowards when it comes to fighting oppression. Even today our wives and daughters are taken from our homes and streets. We are evicted from our houses and lands. The ordinary man still has to go from door to door begging for justice.

What has changed meanwhile is the context, not the contents, of it. We are our own masters, but we are also our own slaves indeed. Even worse, us against us, we are more ruthless as masters and more helpless as slaves. The indigo planters have merely changed their business and the *lathials* have changed their dress.

A frightened majority is treated like a minority in their own country. They are deceived by politicians, ignored by bureaucrats, harassed by musclemen, fleeced by lawyers, persecuted by police, and skimmed by businessmen. This majority could force the British to quit India. They could defeat the Pakistanis in a decisive war. Alas, they are cowered by their own countrymen, who, in the name of freedom, keep them in fear.

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# Bangladesh in CPI 2011: Is improvement sustainable?

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**T**HE Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2011 was released by Transparency International yesterday. In a scale of 0-10, Bangladesh scored 2.7, which is 0.3 higher than in 2010, and occupied 120<sup>th</sup> place among 183 countries compared to 134<sup>th</sup> among 178 countries in 2010. In terms of ranking from below Bangladesh is placed at number 13, one step higher than last year. In the same position as Bangladesh are Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Iran, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Mozambique and Solomon Islands.

While this improvement may generate a sense of satisfaction no definite conclusion can be reached about success in controlling corruption. In addition, the score in the ranking depends also on comparative performance of other countries and the number of countries included or excluded.

Notably, according to the index, Bangladesh remains in the lowest category (below the core of 3) where corruption is perceived to be of grave concern. Moreover, even if this improvement can be sustained, we have a long way to go to score 5 or more, at which level countries are considered to have succeeded in moderately controlling corruption.

In the Asian regional context, Bangladesh has done better than Afghanistan and Myanmar (1.5), Cambodia (2.1), Nepal and Laos (2.2), Pakistan and Maldives (2.5) and Philippines (2.6), whereas we are behind Vietnam (2.8), Indonesia (3.0), India (3.1), Sri Lanka (3.3), Thailand (3.4), China (3.6) and Bhutan (5.7).

The CPI provides an international comparison of performance of countries in terms of perceived degree of prevalence of political and administrative corruption. It is a survey of surveys conducted by various reputed international organisations that bring out the assessment of business people, business analysts, investors, investment analysts and country experts who may or may not be resident in the country concerned. The index has been produced by TI since 1995, when 41 countries were included. The number of countries included in the

index increased over the years, reaching 183 this year.

Somalia, having scored 1, remains at the bottom for the fifth year in a row from 2007. It has been joined at the bottom this year by North Korea, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Sudan, Iraq and Haiti.

New Zealand, having scored 9.5, is the best performer this year -- like in 2010 -- followed by Denmark and Finland (9.4), Sweden (9.3), Singapore (9.2) and Norway (9), meaning that corruption is perceived to be the lowest in these countries. Notably, among Asian countries Singapore has always

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been in the league of highest scorers, having occupied the top position last year together with New Zealand and Denmark. Hong Kong is the other best Asian performer (12<sup>th</sup> from top).

As in previous years, highly developed countries continue to be in the category of those where corruption has been effectively controlled, although UK, US, Austria, Belgium and France have scored less than 8 this year. Notably, US has been ranked behind Qatar, Chile, Bahamas and Barbados.

No country has yet received 100% score, indicating that corruption is not necessarily the monopoly of the developing countries. It is a malaise affecting every country -- developed or developing.

Among the South Asian countries, Bhutan remains the best performer with 5.7 points, same as last year, and occupied the 38<sup>th</sup> place from top. Bhutan's score is better than Poland (5.5), South Korea (5.4), Hungary (4.6), Czech Republic (4.4), and Italy (3.9). Bhutan's performance can be attributed to strict enforcement rule of law and growing institutional capacity to control corruption, and especially the effec-

tiveness of their Anti-corruption Commission.

Among South Asian countries, marginally higher score than last year has been achieved by Afghanistan, Pakistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka, while India had gone down and Nepal and Bhutan have scored the same as last year.

It may be recalled that Bangladesh was earlier placed at the very bottom of the list for five successive years from 2001-2005. In 2006, Bangladesh was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> in 2007, 10<sup>th</sup> in 2008, 13<sup>th</sup> in 2009 and 12<sup>th</sup> in 2010.

As indicated above, although the score and rank have somewhat

improved, there is no room for complaisance, especially when we have a government that came to power with anti-corruption as one of the key top priorities in its election manifesto. The CPI being based on 2-year rolling estimates, and most of the data for Bangladesh being up to June 2011, the score and rank do not reflect more recent developments, particularly allegations of corruption around the Padma Bridge.

On the other hand, the positive result may be attributed to a number of institutional and legal reforms that took place, which could strengthen the capacity to effectively control corruption. These include the enactment of the Right to Information Act, Whistleblower Protection Act, adoption of the implementation plan of the UN Convention against Corruption, and setting up of the Information Commission and the Human Rights Commission. Possible positive assessment of the anti-corruption electoral pledge of the government and the continued reaffirmation of the commitment by the top leadership of the government may have also played a role.

On top of factors that may have

prevented better score and ranking is proposed a set of amendments to the Anti-corruption Act that could severely curtail the independence and effectiveness of the Anti-corruption Commission. Active voice raising by the civil society, media and other stakeholders, especially TIB, has prevented the enactment so far. Whether or not the improvement in the index can be sustained depends a lot on what emerges from the attempt to undermine the authority of the Commission.

The Parliament has become hostage to the boycott culture, making the House a monopolistic terrain of the ruling alliance. Combined with conflict of interest in the parliamentary committees this has grossly undermined the prospect of accountability of the government.

By disregarding the constitutional provision and electoral commitment the government has continued to encourage black money and thereby give legal authority to corruption.

The introduction of a change in the procurement rules that experience and expertise would not be mandatory up to a certain threshold is detrimental to transparency, efficiency and integrity in the public sector. Increasing political involvement in various forms of influence-peddling in bidding for public contracts, procurements, recruitments, and grabbing of land and water bodies are against the government's electoral commitment. It also increases impunity and erodes capacity to control corruption.

This year's performance in CPI is a timely message that unless the government has the courage to allow the law to take its due course without fear or favour, instead of appearing to protect the high and mighty alleged of corruption, the prospect of sustaining the improvement will be lost.

What needs to be done by the government appears simple -- to take a close look, perhaps on a daily basis, at their election manifesto. The more their delivery will be inconsistent with the election pledges the greater will be the prospect of losing ground in CPI as well as losing the trust of the people who voted them to power.

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