

Human Rights Day

Strengthen institutions and increase people's awareness

ONE wonders looking back to 63 years to this day whether we as a nation have been able to fulfill the pious aims enshrined in the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The essence, or perhaps the soul of the Declaration, is Article 3 that asserts the right of every individual to life, liberty and the security of his or her person. The moot question after all these years is where and how have the states failed to fulfill what has now, over time, come to be accepted as a contract between governments and their peoples. And that is what we must ask ourselves too. The world is observing today the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the form of the world's Human Rights Day. And we are certain that it will be celebrated with much fanfare and flourish in Bangladesh too. And that is what begs the very question. Regrettably, our commitment as a nation, to ensuring the basic rights of our people, has been restricted to articulations of intent and expression of hopes without much substance in practice. Unfortunately, it seems that our successive governments have failed to see the symbiotic linkage between human rights and good governance, justice and fair play and the rule of law. While the concept of human rights has been flaunted at random, very little has been done to realize the aspirations contained in the Declaration. And that is so because the people are hardly aware of their rights, particularly the poor and the socially and economically marginalised and other vulnerable groups. And when there is lack of awareness there will be very little motivation to fight for it. Also, our institutions entrusted with the task of ensuring the rights of the people suffer from inherent weaknesses that have been, inexplicably, left unaddressed by all the successive governments. It should, therefore, be our resolve on this day to increase people's awareness of their rights and also to strengthen the democratic institutions so that they can play their due role without fear or favour.

Rohingya repatriation

Myanmar's assurance welcome

ASSURANCE by the Myanmar government to take back the rest of the Rohingya refugees numbering about 28000 is indeed very welcome and good news. This has come at the end of the bilateral talks with PM Sheikh Hasina and President U Thein Sein in the Myanmar capital. One would recall that a similar call was also made by our foreign minister in Bali in September 2009, very soon after the AL led alliance government assumed the reins of the government. We welcome the assurance to take back the Rohingyas albeit after verification, particularly for the reason that Myanmar has shifted its earlier position that Rohingyas were not an ethnic entity of that country. It should be noted that Bangladesh has had to endure great stress for almost two decades of a very large number of Rohingyas, who were illegally evicted from their hearth and homes despite the fact that they were living in that region of Myanmar for centuries. And notwithstanding the spontaneous assistance of the donor agencies and other international organisations, the refugees were creating adverse law and order and social and environmental problems for Bangladesh which, given our meager resources, had been difficult to mange. Reportedly, many of these refugees had also managed to merge with the local population and eventually get Bangladeshi passports to travel abroad as Bangladeshi workers. And, in spite of its limitations, not only had the Bangladesh government handled the refugee issue with the most humanitarian approach it had also extended all kinds of assistance to its eastern neighbour for the repatriation of the Rohingyas. We would like to emphasise on quick repatriation, and since there is already a list cleared by the UNHCR we feel that the process can commence immediately. We also endorse our PM's suggestion to establish a working

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 10

- 1898** Spanish-American War: The Treaty of Paris is signed, officially ending the conflict.
- 1901** The first Nobel Prizes are awarded.
- 1902** Women are given the right to vote in Tasmania.
- 1906** US President Theodore Roosevelt wins the Nobel Peace Prize, becoming the first American to win a Nobel Prize.
- 1948** The UN General Assembly adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- 1978** Arab-Israeli conflict: Prime Minister of Israel Menachem Begin and President of Egypt Anwar Sadat are jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
- 1983** Democracy is restored in Argentina with the assumption of President Raúl Alfonsín.

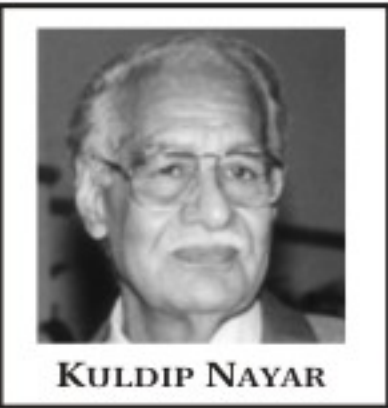
STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE advent of yet another civic body comprising politicians, academics, lawyers amongst others, with an avowed objective of promoting democratic culture and intending to do an honest constructive criticism of the government, keeping in mind the nation's interest, does not appear surprising. By now civil society activism is at least two decades old in Bangladesh. Whether or not such entities have succeeded in creating the desired impact on the body-politic could be a matter of opinion. The media and discerning citizens, however, evince interest in such bodies with perhaps hopes in mind. In the socio-political circumstances like ours, or for that matter elsewhere, it needs to be understood that civil society activism cannot be a substitute for political activism. Therefore, concerned civil society activists should join political parties with a view to earn political credibility to influence party politics; thereby fostering democratic norms and practices. Under prevailing circumstances, the new civic body may intend to offer its services to mediate the confrontational relations between the two major political parties. The question, however, is: do the parties really seek a solution within the framework of parliamentary democracy? Additionally, do they recognise that each has a legitimate role to play in national politics and that democratic politics is unworkable without an ongoing process of political dialogue between the two parties? One must admit that civil society is unfortunately much too heterogeneous a body to play a collective role in politics. The voice of such a body can, however, both educate and mobilise public opinion to a point where the political parties have to take note of the concerns raised by civil

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDEEP NAVAR

Islamabad's fears might have been assuaged. And probably Pakistan would have attended the meeting on Afghanistan at Bonn. It is no use shedding tears over the spilt milk. However, many in India wonder why Islamabad did not accept 'regret.' The regret is not exactly an apology but it comes to that. It does mean a feeling of sorrow for wrong doing. Probably, Islamabad would have accepted regret if there had not been a history of deliberate violations by the US and the Nato forces despite Pakistan's protests. The fact is that America and its allies care too hoots for Pakistan's sovereignty or sentiments of its people. Right from the 9/11 attack on New York, Pakistan has been treated as a country which is at the beck and call of the US. At that time, Secretary of State Colin Powell rang up the then Islamabad's Foreign Secretary Abdul Sattar to inform his government that they would begin carpet bombing from Pakistan instead of Afghanistan if Islamabad was not on their side. Pakistan could not dare to say 'no' then. How can it resist the pressure now even when the rank and file of the army has been permitted to retaliate without awaiting orders from the command? It may sound harsh but the Pakistani soldiers have got used to the bullying of US soldiers after having participated in joint operations which are still continuing. True, Pakistan has played tough after the killing of soldiers and has even got the American drone base vacated. But it is bowing to the enraged public opinion in Pakistan. I am still not sure how long Pakistan Army Chief Ashfaq Parvez Kyani would stay intractable. The armed forces in Pakistan over the years have become so injured to American's arms as well as aid that a U-turn does not look plausible. Some rational-

society activists. A relevant area of activity could be the commissioning of a group of well-respected lawyers and human rights activists to adjudicate on claims of both government and opposition, as to the accusations of official persecution. The issue of democratic use of parliamentary time and the electronic media can be addressed by the civil society. Actual actions would mean taking the responsibility of monitoring all sessions of parliament and preparing reports both on use and abuse of parliamentary time. Such reports could help in sorting out allegations of unfair treatment made by opposition. The challenge is to find credible figures that are willing to rise above political position to really perform a mediating role. Their acceptability will

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need to be established through merit and objectivity of their reports. To find such citizens would be intensely problematic in Bangladesh today. Staying out of parliament by elected representatives deals a devastating blow to democracy. It is for every citizen to see that in all the parliamentary sessions in the last two decades roughly half the population of Bangladesh remained unrepresented. Such continued lack of representation can definitely create a perilous apathy wherein assault on institutions of democracy will not be taken note of. Do our politicians realise the gravity of the scenario? The civil society is impressing upon the importance of an authentic gesture of reconciliation to restore our political process to the path of sanity. The intractability in the mutual hostilities of

isation has already started taking place. A limited cooperation is visible on the ground. A Nato commander has said the tragic incident has not disrupted their operation or their cooperation with Pakistan. America's annoyance does not suit Islamabad in anyway because China cannot fill the vacuum, nor can India help because relations between the two are nowhere at the stage where New Delhi would assist. Despite the regret over the killings, I do not see Washington behaving differently. It is fighting a war against Taliban who have their headquarters in Pakistan and the US or the Nato forces will continue to chastise them, with Islamabad's cooperation if possible or without it if necessary. I do not see the Drone attacks stopping or the supply line to American and NATO forces snapping because the two may

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use the Afghanistan territory for drones and the old Soviet republics for supply. The target is Taliban, the fundamentalists, who America's sees mixed up with certain sections of the army. Nonetheless, both sides realize that they face a situation which they cannot handle singly but cannot go back to the equation which existed before the killing of soldiers. Still both America and Pakistan may go to the brink they have done so many a times before but will not jump. Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has already said that Pakistan wants to reconstruct its relations with the US which in turn has welcomed the statement. The problem that confronts the world is the withdrawal of 130,000 troops of America and those of Nato in

the politicians has to stop and their insensitivity to public woes must not cross the threshold of citizens' patience. The principal accusation against our civil society activists is that they are a bunch of fair weather birds that have mostly remained somnolent if not in slumber when crisis after crisis befell the nation and have found time and energy only when national elections are around the corner. It is further alleged that some of them having support of extra-territorial patrons have taken to the field to implement their own selfish agenda. Some accusations have it that material considerations have played a major part in the so-called high profile postures and deliberations of the civil society groups. That politics is all-pervasive and all-encompassing and politicians across

the divide, in our parlance, are overbearing have to be admitted by any discerning observer. Therefore, it would appear that many vital public functions have not been attended to in the yesteryears and the resultant appearance of civil society groups on the socio-political horizon of Bangladesh to dwell on substantive matters of State functions need not be viewed adversely. The civil society groups are not overstepping their limit when they say that a democracy must do stocktaking at the time of elections when a new batch of lawmakers is to be put in power. There is no harm in their commenting that the party system takes grievous toll of a member's independence, individual judgment and freedom of action because they are not denying that the party system

does bring about coherence and unity of purpose in the actual working of democracy. The civil society does not do any wrong when it says that the duty of every citizen is not merely to vote but to vote wisely. That he must be guided by reason and by reason alone, vote for the best man, irrespective of any other consideration and irrespective of the party label. The civil society is perhaps right when it says that the right man in the wrong party is preferable to the wrong man in the right party. The civil society does a service when it points to fatalism as our besetting national foible that has to be conquered. They cannot be taken to task or subjected to vituperative for venturing to ensure that falsehood in our political arena does not have too long an innings before the ultimate moment of truth arrives. The civil society cannot be blamed for reminding our citizens that their apathy, particularly of the elite who have almost opted out of the democratic process, have been responsible for the corruption, incompetence and ever-increasing inefficiency. The activists of civil society have the good of the nation in their thoughts when they say that we should think of making some badly needed changes in our constitutional law. In fact, civil society may initiate discussion and discourses on desired changes in this regard. They should not be criticised for warning that the country must not be allowed to roll into authoritarianism and that our varied intelligence and creativity must not disappear into conformist darkness. Civilisation presupposes the supremacy of civil authority and therefore, if we do not want our constitution to be shorn of its strength and become an idle mockery and perish before the grave has closed upon the last of its illustrious founders, the civil society's voice of reason shall be heard with respect and the desired circumspection. The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star.

is called, the Memogate. President Asif Zardari, Army Chief Kyani and ISI head Lt. General Ahmed Shuja Pasha have been named respondents in a petition filed by Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The petition is based on an unsigned memo by the then Pakistan's envoy to the US, Hussain Haqqani, to the American military command to rescue the Zardari government from the army and the ISI responsible for dealing with Taliban. The army saw to it that Haqqani would resign and he did. The problem is bigger than Haqqani's exit. It is how to make Washington repose its faith once again in the Zardari government which America sees completely under the Pakistan army. Pakistan Foreign Minister has herself admitted in public that the Army is stronger than the elected government. I have no doubt that Haqqani's successor, Sherry Rehman, has the ability and fiancé to reestablish the rapport with Washington and also convince it that the elected government cannot be pushed away by the army. She is also Islamabad's trump card for good relations with India where she is trusted. In fact, this is the time when the Zardari government should take the initiative to spread goodwill in the region. Bangladesh is celebrating its 40th independence anniversary. Although it means the liberation from West Pakistan it also means that Dhaka has not allowed itself to be pawn in the region's chessboard. The Zardari government can go down in history if it helps the subcontinent to shed hatred and work for the betterment of the poor who are concentrated in the region. But first thing first: Islamabad should offer apology to Bangladesh and start a chapter of friendship. By doing so, the Zardari government will be strengthening itself against any interference from the army. The writer is an eminent Indian Journalist.