

SUNDAY POUCH

Hope and expectations in 2012

Let good sense prevail everywhere

THE ringing in of a new year is always an occasion for an expression of hope and a time to look back at what has been and could have been. As we welcome the advent of the year 2012, it is poignant hope and profound expectations which today form the core of thoughts among individuals across the globe. For us in Bangladesh, the hope is simply one of life taking a more progressive turn through a turning away from everything negative that held us back in the year just ended.

In terms of politics, let 2012 be a harbinger of change in political thoughts and attitudes, change that should usher in a time of cooperation and accommodation between and among our political classes. Our expectation is of a better, more secure and safe society this year, a proposition that can only be realised through law and order improving, through ensuring the dignity of the citizen. Overall, it is once again good governance, with parliament playing its full part with both ruling and opposition parties in attendance, that we look forward to in these new times.

The year which drew to a close yesterday was, like all earlier years, one of good cheer running parallel with unmitigated disappointment not merely in Bangladesh but also in the rest of the world. Around the world, the spectacle of people rising in spontaneous revolt against their oppressive governments --- in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya --- only reinforced the old belief that nations have the capacity and the courage to take on the powerful and the arrogant. It was an idea which extended itself to Europe and America, for different reasons. The global recession brought people out on the streets, to make it clear to governments that wisdom is not the monopoly of politicians and that power must be exercised in truly judicious manner. The spontaneity of popular rebellion, as in the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement, as in the demonstrations in Greece, were a measure of the hope one yet entertains about people's awareness of their conditions.

Let 2012 build on that hope, on earlier expectations. And let the New Year be a chance for good sense to prevail everywhere.

We wish an auspicious year to our readers.

Fuel price hike is not the answer

Cut government spending

THE government has once again raised the price of fuel, and once again by Tk5 across the board for all types. This is the sixth time in case of furnace oil and four times in case of petrol, octane, diesel and kerosene, that prices have been raised in one year. The increase has come only after 48 days of the last hike. This is a record of sorts admittedly, but more importantly the spate of increases exposes the state of desperation of the government, for which it is in a large measure to blame.

The extremely deleterious consequences of the cumulative price hike need no emphasis, but one is at a loss that the wise men that are running the country's economy are not able to see what is coming. The worst-hit is the manufacturing sector, bulk of which is run on furnace oil. And this has been hit the hardest by nearly two and a half times rise since the beginning of the year in four installments. Rise in price of diesel, particularly at the beginning of the next cropping season is bound to affect the farmers and in turn the greater portion of the population that are in the middle and low income groups, as will the rise in transport cost. And there is the import bill and inflation to contend with.

For the government the easiest option is to increase the prices of things to offset deficit. And in any case, people do not buy either the excuse of subsidy or the price hike of oil in the international market. If anything, there is downward trend in oil prices and the problem of subsidy could be tackled by other measures.

We believe strongly that fuel price hike is not the answer to the problem. The government should seriously consider other options that do not transmit the pressure on to the common man, like, among other things, cutting down on government expenditures as well as on less

A peep inside North Korea



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

IF you ever happen to meet a North Korean government official and ask him about the size of his country and the population, do not be

surprised if he gives the land area of the two Koreas combined and quotes the population that inhabits both North and South Korea. This is because he thinks that the division of the Korean peninsula into two countries is a temporary phenomenon and the two territories will return to be one country again.

The Korean war that broke out in 1950 was a conflict prompted by certain foreign power and interests. The hostilities ended with the declaration of an armistice in 1953. As no peace agreement was put in place that finalised borders, the land and sea territories that were actually occupied by each country till today remain the border demarcation between them.

Since the armistice, South Korea, with the help of the US, quickly reconstructed its war torn economy. Over the past decades, it morphed into a developed country. By 2004, South Korea was able to join the exclusive trillion dollar club of world economies.

But what was the situation in North Korea? The country which was initially aided by the now defunct Soviet Union and later by China kept up its preparation for a possible second round of hostilities in the peninsula. Its "Great leader" Kim Ill Sung concentrated on building its military might. At some point it did start to industrialise but soon had to abandon it largely because the Soviet Union itself broke up.

It must be remembered that between the two Koreas the North had more natural resources. The South was essentially an agricultural country. With the loss of the economic support from the Soviet Union the North had to fend for itself and developed self-reliant programmes.

But because of a personalised system of governance, the resources available to it remained either unutilised or mismanaged. The South of course followed a separate course. It opened up its economy, introduced industrial conglomerates called "chaebol," and allowed foreign investors and use of modern technology. The outcome is evident from the following figures.

North Korea, according to some estimates, had a GDP in 2009 (based on purchasing power parity) of \$40 billion. Its per capita income in 2008 was \$1,800. The GDP based on purchasing power parity of South Korea in 2010 was a whopping \$1.45 trillion. Its per capita income rose to \$17,000. In 2010, the real GDP growth of South Korea was 6.1% while for North Korea it was a negative 0.9%.

Due to inefficiencies in production

North Korea Kim Ill Sung, suffered a stroke a few years back, many in the international community expressed their fear about the future of that country and were worried about who would succeed him. In any country where policy directions depend on individuals there is always deep apprehension when the leader dies.

So the "Dear Leader" selected his third son, Kim Ill Un, to succeed him to this powerful position. He was named the "Great Successor," and he had been groomed to take over during the last two years. He was bestowed with the rank of a four-star general before his father's death. In North Korea, the military takes precedence in all matters and a high position in the military hierarchy gives power and great influence.

Therefore, when Kim Jong Ill died the ruling group allowed this 29-year

old successor to quickly take over the highest position in the powerful Military Commission. He was also made the Secretary General of North Korea's Workers Party. These positions enabled him to play the leading role in arranging the state funeral for his father. It is now a credible assumption that there is perhaps little or no resistance to the anointed successor to take over. But it is not yet clear whether he nominally heads a collective leadership or is the supreme leader. Only time will tell.

But the people of the two Koreas are one and the same. They speak the same language and have similar aspirations. It, therefore, seems imperative that the two Koreas must unite in order to restore their past and move together to a prosperous future.

But what is preventing them from doing so?

First, the Korean war has technically not ended. A state of belligerence has been artificially propped up among the two people by interested parties. As the North has a huge army and nuclear bombs at its disposal it can afford to continue on the present path. The people of the North do not seem to have any say in the state of things.

The South on its part is heavily dependent on the US for its security. So it has lost its power of independent action. The US, in order to punish the North and make it keep up its belligerent behaviour, has also imposed economic sanctions to restrict its maneuverability. The result is that the wishes of the people of the two Koreas are ignored and lost.

A formal closure of the Korean war and signing an agreement to that effect would go a long way in reunifying Korea. This would perhaps stop the North from giving an excuse for maintaining such a huge army. It would also encourage the South to consider options other than those proffered to her by the US and its allies. The international community can then put pressure on the authorities in the North and South and bring them together.

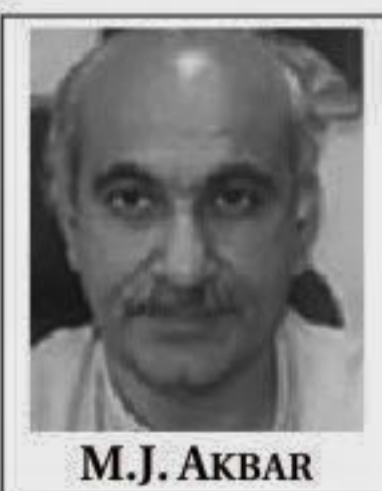
There is an old Chinese proverb that a person who says that something is impossible should not interrupt the person who is doing it. In the case of unifying the people of Korea, the world must ensure now that no one should interrupt this process. Small steps need to be taken with the coming of a new leader in the North. Can it really happen?

The writer is a former Ambassador and the Chairman of the Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies. E-Mail : ashfaq303@hotmail.com

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BYLINE

The year of ludicre



M.J. AKBAR

WHAT precisely is the difference between ridiculous and ludicrous? With their inter-changeable syllables they

even sound like each other. Philology is not very helpful. One word has a root, ridicule; but there is no "ludicre" in English. Why? Since language does not have a Pope whose word is law, we will never get an answer. My own view, that ridiculous is pathos and ludicrous is bathos, is probably no more than a literary conceit dredged up to justify the inexplicable.

Since lists are a congenital part of year-end rituals, one feels obliged to offer some sort of homage to custom. A short list of two will do: the most ridiculous, and the most ludicrous. A rummage through politics poses a problem. There is simply too much to choose from. It doesn't seem worth the effort. The harvest is so much better outside the realm of pomp, power and pretty sordid levels of corruption.

Nothing I have heard in the death-bed year of 2011 was more ridiculous than Sourav Ganguly's command to our cricket team in Australia on the "Agneepath Series:" Be Fearless! After which he added a paean to his own fearlessness. That was both cheeky and thick. Long before he retired, Ganguly began to play cricket

with his neck: his neck was far more agile than his bat against the rising ball. On more than one occasion Ganguly developed mysterious back aches at the sight of a green pitch on the first morning. Whenever the world's quickies were short of a laugh all they had to do was watch a video of Ganguly trying to get out of the way, and the party could begin.

Ganguly had class, but he lacked courage. No one is perfect.

Virendra Sehwag has courage by the bucket, and talent by the pail, although when it comes to judgement you need to measure it by a table-

[what the heck: let's coin a word for the new year] established in 2011. It is well known that Press Council chairman Justice Markandey Katju's heart is in the right place, and his high intellect worthy of those who have achieved a place on the Supreme Court bench. But his mind does like an occasional walk in space. He has said, in his new avatar as conscience-keeper-cum-godfather of hacks, that journalists can be unread, tasteless and enjoy a bit of opium in the office. In his ideal world, cricket and Dev Anand's death do not constitute frontpage

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spoon. That is him. Take it or leave, and we take it, happily, for Sehwag's presence far outweighs the snuffle at his departure. On the other hand if you want an example of the ludicrous, you can watch the rate at which hair is reappearing on Sehwag's head. Since we don't watch Sehwag to study the pace of hair transplants, it doesn't matter. [Incidentally, what do Australians call the Agneepath Series? Probably the XXXXpath Tests; the X's are of course code for a four-letter word called "fire."]

We may have to search elsewhere, however, for the heights of ludicre

news. By such Olympian standards, he has a lot of work ahead, so let us wish him a happy new year.

But his campaign for a Bharat Ratna to Mirza Ghalib and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay is ludicrous. One of my great personal regrets is insufficient knowledge of Urdu, and ignorance of Persian: the two books I would carry to the proverbial desert island are the complete works of Shakespeare and Ghalib. Ghalib's poetry is eternal, but his views did not always belong to the narrative of modern India. Ghalib lived through 1857. He watched 23 Mughal princes being hanged and

fellow Dilliwallahs being massacred by merciless British columns. Ghalib was more interested in a pension from Queen Victoria, as is evident from his diary, Dastambuy, than a war for independence. This does not diminish his poetry, but it does raise questions about his politics.

Justice Katju has read a million more books than any silly journalist, but perhaps he has not come across Joya Chaterji's masterly Bengal Divided [Cambridge University Press, 1996]. He would surely have noticed a speech that Saratchandra, an undoubted literary genius, made in 1926. There isn't space for the full text, but a few sentences establish the flavor -- and trust me, I am leaving out the more gruesome bits: "The truth is that if Muslims ever say they want to unite with Hindus, there is no greater hoax. The Muslims came to India to plunder it, not to establish a kingdom...Unity can only be realised among equals..." Hindu-Muslim unity' is a bombastic slogan... Hindustan is the homeland of the Hindus." Et al. Saratchandra's India was not the India that Mahatma Gandhi lived and died for.

The past has its glories. The past has its dilemmas. The past has its mistakes. The past has its rage.

Shall we reserve the Bharat Ratna for those who fought for a future in which every Indian is an equal?

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

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 1

1801
The legislative union of Kingdom of Great Britain and Kingdom of Ireland is completed to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

1877
Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom is proclaimed Empress of India.

1949
United Nations cease-fire takes effect in Kashmir from one minute before midnight. War between India and Pakistan stops accordingly.

1958
The European Community is established.

1979
Formal diplomatic relations are established between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America.

1992
The Russian Federation is officially formed.

1995
The World Trade Organization goes into effect.