

CROSS TALK

Rally or people's woes

Keep such programmes to specific places only

PEOPLE are deeply respectful of important national days and would want to observe those with due fervour, respect and solemnity. And indeed 7th March is one such day in our history. However, what we saw being done in the name of rally on the historic day was totally bereft of any consideration for public convenience. It is the right of every political party to hold political programmes but should the common person be made to suffer for that?

The traffic snarl started from early in the morning with long tailbacks due to the major roads being blocked to traffic movements, which lasted for the greater part of the day. The front page picture in the 8th March issue of this newspaper depicts the situation most vividly. The Shahabag intersection that is one of the very few east-west traffic links of the city was blocked off due to the rally. It looked as if the city heart was "occupied" depriving the citizenry of its use, putting school going children, office goers and most of all, patients going to hospitals, under tremendous physical agony. Most had to endure the distress for anywhere between two and six hours. How can the authorities inflict such sufferings on the people? Is it because everything of the ruling party goes? One wonders whether any other political party would have been allowed to virtually lay siege to a part of the capital. In celebrating a national day the ruling party has only managed to incur people's displeasure.

And that begs the question. Should the administration not think of alternative locations to hold such rallies rather than on the main thoroughfare, and even better if those were confined to a particular ground? Given that there are more imminent political programmes, our fears of further public misery are compounded by the prospect of impending chaos on the streets that these rallies will create. And in this regard we had expressed our worry about the government not allowing BNP to use the Paltan Maidan.

It is not just the question of personal inconvenience only. Has anyone worked out the sums involving loss of productivity in man hours and the wastage of fuel given that what takes half an hour to cover took 4 hours in some cases. It is also a question of what image of Dhaka we are projecting to the outside world. It is already the second worst city in the world and images such as we saw yesterday will only keep prospective investors out. We should not forget that visibility of the capital is one of the biggest inputs for attracting foreign investment. What we saw yesterday will only detract, not attract, investors.

Humanitarian situation worsens in Syria

UN should take a strong stance and intervene

THERE seems to be no end to the violence in Syria resulting in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis there. So far, the Syrian regime has even been denying the entry of humanitarian assistance from International Red Cross and other humanitarian agencies into that country.

Thanks to the continued efforts of the UN that its humanitarian chief Valerie Amos has finally been allowed entry for a two-day visit to Syria. The horrific scene of devastation and carnage she is reported to have seen in the embattled city of Baba Amr in the City of Homs in Southwestern Syria calls for unhindered flow of relief and other international humanitarian assistances for the affected people of Syria.

The conflict started a year ago following cruel suppression of the street demonstrations by people, who were demanding reform.

The protests have now turned into a full-fledged rebellion, while the government of President Bashar al Asad has unleashed a reign of terror to crush it.

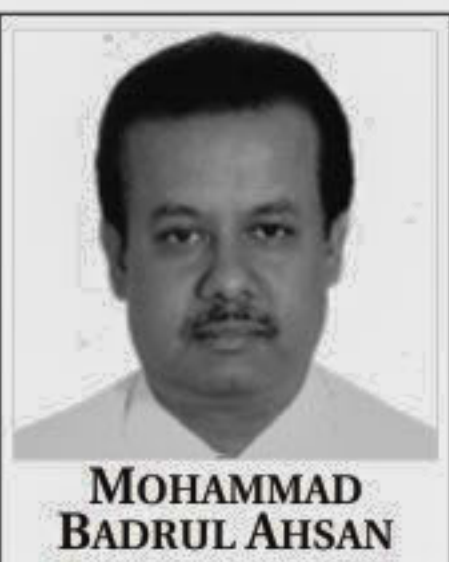
But so far all attempts by the international community to stop the ongoing violence and bloodshed in Syria has failed as the permanent members of the UN Security Council could not agree to a proposal to that end. As a result, the repressive Syrian regime has been getting bolder to carry out a systematic massacre in the cities like Homs, Deraa and Idlib, where people rose up in arms against the dictatorial regime.

The humanitarian situation in these cities has been deteriorating very fast.

The situation also brings to the fore the urgency to stop this violence in Syria before it is too late.

We call upon the world community, especially the UN, to take a strong stand and prevail upon the Syrian authorities to ensure the supply of emergency humanitarian aid

A mosh pit of madness



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CERTAIN expressions get more gravitas when said in French. *C'est la vie* is a French phrase that means "such is life."

Anyone says it with a jerk of the shoulder means he couldn't care less about almost anything in life. *Fin de siècle* is another French term that encompasses both the closing and onset of an era. The "spirit" of *fin de siècle* often refers to the boredom, cynicism, pessimism and the widespread belief that civilisation leads to decadence. The French have an amazing way of capturing more meaning for their words.

Folie à plusieurs is a French expression that means the "madness of many." It means plurality of insanity, a collective derangement that instead of being many depravities in one is one depravity in many. If an asylum can have a number of lunatics living under one roof, one form of lunacy can exist under many roofs. This lunacy is contagious and happens to people of a country or continent at the time of wars, revolutions and social upheavals, times of grave convulsions and grievous revulsions.

How does one explain when it's neither? February for the Language Movement is gone and we are marching through March for the Declaration of Independence. Then there will be April for the Pahela Boishakh and a long lull until December for the Victory Day, another month-long ritual of collective observance. People stream out on the streets, sing, dance and recite poetry, jostle and hustle, enjoy the holidays and go back home.

But these collective celebrations are hardly calibrations of our collective soul. These are more like a dreary brownout, comparable to *rallentando* in music, a gradual slack-



NICHOLAS MONU

Joie de Vivre in French means cheerful enjoyment of life. In a mosh pit of madness, faith is debased by frenzy. When roads are congested with large gatherings, we unitedly share our divisions.

ening of tempo. It is more like a winding down. In February we celebrate our mother tongue, craving deep down inside that our children spoke better English. March is the month of independence, but few of us will reject if offered an opportunity to settle abroad. It's an increasing fad to have dual citizenship, earning at home and spending abroad, juggling passports like time machines.

The Pahela Boishakh is equally schizophrenic. We become full-fledged Bangalis for one day, perhaps living in the subliminal anxiety of patriotism throughout the month. The irony is that our minds, homes and wardrobes at the same time are inexorably changing to catch up

with foreign styles, fashions, and culinaries. And, December is the month of pride. More songs, dances and poetry recitals to remember we had once fought the enemy and defeated it as well. It doesn't matter that we have become our worst enemies, us defeating us since then.

Last week there was a buck-passing contest between a retired bureaucrat and a tired politician. The bureaucrat told a parable about a mother who used a cap, a wallet and a gun to test her son's inclinations. If the son were to choose the cap, she was to assume that he liked to grow up to become a man of letters. If he were to choose the wallet, it meant he liked to become a pick-

pocket. Lastly, if he were to pick the gun, he would grow up to become a musclem. When the son picked up the cap first, and put the wallet in his pocket and took the gun in his hand, the mother concluded her son was going to become a politician.

The audience broke into uproarious laughter. While the bureaucrat gloated, the politician looked visibly miffed. He quickly retorted that retired bureaucrats, not politicians, were to blame for the woes of this land. The politician was clueless it was an incomplete joke.

The mother had extended her experiment to her other sons. One son picked up the cap only, knowing the pen was mightier than guns and wallets. This clever son became a bureaucrat. The other son picked up the wallet, believing money could buy everything. He became a businessman. The poor mother had been tricked, because all three sons eventually grew up to join politics.

It takes us back to where we started. All our patriotic events are heavily attended. Our patriotic verve and its ostentatious display are comparable to a movie that is a smashing hit at the box office, but gets poor reviews from critics. We individually denigrate what we collectively celebrate. Touché! We are a nation of split personalities.

Scottish author Charles Mackay contends that men think in herds and go mad in herds, but they only recover their senses slowly. The herd mentality is obvious from months of collective undulation. The madness part explains how we are capable of coming together as crowds and going away as strangers as before.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Israel's best friend

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

THE only question I have when it comes to President Obama and Israel is whether he is the most pro-Israel president in history or just one of the most. Why? Because the question of whether Israel has the need and the right to pre-emptively attack Iran as it develops a nuclear potential is one of the most hotly contested issues on the world stage today. It is also an issue fraught with danger for Israel and American Jews, neither of whom want to be accused of dragging America into a war, especially one that could weaken an already frail world economy.

In that context, President Obama, in his interview with *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg and in his address to AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, offered the greatest support for Israel that any president could at this time: He redefined the Iran issue. He said -- rightly -- that it was not simply about Israel's security, but about US national security and global security.

Obama did this by making clear that allowing Iran to develop nuclear weapons and then "containing" it -- the way the US contained the Soviet Union -- was not a viable option, because if Iran acquires a nuclear bomb, all the states around it would seek to acquire one as well. This would not only lead to a nuclear Middle East, but it would likely prompt other countries to hedge their commitments to the global Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The global nuclear black market would then come alive and we would see the dawning of a more

dangerous world.

"Preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon isn't just in the interest of Israel, it is profoundly in the security interests of the United States," the president told *The Atlantic*. "If Iran gets a nuclear weapon, this would run completely contrary to my policies of non-proliferation. The risks of an Iranian nuclear weapon falling into the hands of terrorist organizations are profound. ... It would also provide

Iran the additional capability to sponsor and protect its proxies in carrying out terrorist attacks, because they are less fearful of retaliation. ... If Iran gets a nuclear weapon, I won't name the countries, but there are probably four or five countries in the Middle East who say, 'We are going to start a programme, and we will have nuclear weapons.' And at that point, the prospect for miscalculation in a region that has that many tensions and fissures is profound. You essentially then duplicate the challenges of India and Pakistan fivefold or tenfold." In sum, the president added: "The dangers of an Iran getting nuclear weapons that then leads to a free-for-all in the Middle East is something that I think would be very dangerous for the world."

Every Israeli and friend of Israel should be thankful to the president for framing the Iran issue this way. It is important strategically for Israel, because it makes clear that dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat was not Israel's problem alone. And it is important politically, because this decision about whether to attack Iran is coinciding with the US election. The last thing Israel or American friends of Israel -- Jewish and Christian -- want is to give their

enemies a chance to claim that Israel is using its political clout to embroil America in a war that is not in its interest. That could easily happen because backing for Israel today has never been more politicised. In recent years, Republicans have tried to make support for Israel a wedge issue that would enable them to garner a higher percentage of Jewish votes and campaign contributions, which traditionally have swung overwhelmingly Democratic. This has led to an arms race with the Democrats over who is more pro-Israel -- and over-the-top declarations, like Newt Gingrich's that the Palestinians "are an invented people." And it could easily happen because money in politics has never

been more important for running campaigns, and the Israel lobby -- both its Jewish and evangelical Christian wings -- has never been more influential, because of its ability to direct campaign contributions to supportive candidates. As such, no one should want domestic electoral politics mixed up with the Iran decision, which is why it was so important that the president redefined the Iran problem as a global proliferation threat and grounded his decision-making in American realism, not politics. Reports from the AIPAC convention this week indicated that those advocating military action were getting the loudest cheers. I'd invite all those cheering to think about all the unintended and unanticipated consequences of the Iraq war or Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. That's not a reason for paralysis. It's a reason to heed Obama's call to give diplomacy and biting sanctions a chance to work, while keeping the threat of force on the table. If it comes to war, let it be because the ayatollahs were ready to sacrifice their whole economy to get a nuke and, therefore, America -- the only country that can truly take down Iran's nuclear program -- had to act to protect the global system, not just Israel. I respect that this is a deadly serious issue for Israel -- which has the right to act on its own -- but President Obama has built a solid strategic and political case for letting America take the lead.

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The writer is a columnist for The New York Times and a Pulitzer Prize winning author.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 9

632 The Last Sermon (Khutbah, Khutbatul Wada') of Prophet Muhammad.

1977 The Hanafi Muslim Siege: In a thirty-nine hour standoff, armed Hanafi Muslims seize three Washington, D.C., buildings, killing two and taking 149 hostage.

1991 Massive demonstrations are held against Slobodan Milošević in Belgrade.