

Continuous hartal unacceptable

While disappearance is abhorrent, why punish people?

IN view of the pre-hartal violence and vandalism, we thought we had reasons to be relieved that the hartal went off more or less peacefully yesterday marked by sporadic incidents of clashes and infliction of injuries. But with the opposition announcing dawn-to-dusk hartal on a continuing basis until Ilias and his driver are found out, the temporary relief has been replaced by a sense of serious concern that we may be in for a fresh cycle of violence.

The law enforcement agencies followed the standard government procedure of confining the activists and their leaders to cordoned-off spaces on the first day of hartal. A large number of protestors were detained, let alone a hundred sued for offences connected with torching of vehicles on the previous day.

Some pertinent questions arise from the penultimate day to the hartal including the rationale for the countrywide standstill set to run continuously. It is clear that the violent incidents of setting a number of vehicles to fire were geared to intimidate and terrorise people to acquiesce in the hartal. In particular, the most shocking and insidious instance involved the death of a bus driver in sleep inside a parked vehicle that was mind-bogglingly set ablaze by goons who couldn't have acted on their own. So, who is responsible for the driver's death that left a family completely in the lurch? Opposition leader did not even express regret over the incident.

The other question that exercises public mind is: In what way hartals can advance the cause of finding out Ilias Ali? On the contrary, the people of the country and the economy are made to suffer whilst the mystery centred around Ilias' disappearance remains a law and order matter that cannot be resolved through political agitation.

The Prime Minister, for her part, suggesting that the opposition had hidden Ilias Ali set the probe on a wrong track. This irresponsible finger-pointing made light of the sense of purpose that the PM was expected to demonstrate in the face of disappearance of BNP's organising secretary. This adversely reflected on the government's credibility in handling the case.

Even so, that is no ground to justify hartals that are an imposition on the people like they always are sadly betraying insensitivity to public good.

Continuous hartal is especially reprehensible because of its potential to ratchet up confrontation between the ruling party and the opposition and thereby pushing the country into the vortex of graver uncertainty.

Law enforcers' complicity in crime

Take cognizance of NHRC Chairman's statement

THE issue of 'disappearances' has occupied the time of most of us of late, more so after the very recent vanishing of a high-profile BNP office bearer. Unfortunately, nearly all of those who have 'disappeared' have remained untraceable so far, while some have been found dead, their bodies turning up in odd places.

It is regrettable that in most of these instances the finger has been pointed towards the law enforcing agencies because of the circumstantial evidence as well as statements, in certain cases, of the victims' relatives. That the suspicions were not ill-founded have been, too a very large extent, established by the recent remarks of the Chairman of the Nation Human Rights Commission that the NHRC, during its investigations, has found the connection of certain law enforcing agencies in some of these cases.

If that is so, may we ask what actions have been taken to bring those law enforcers suspected of complicity in these disappearances to book? As per the statement of the chairman NHRC, the findings and recommendations have been sent to the Home Ministry. Certainly there has to be systemic flaws in institutions whose members indulge in unlawful activities such this. And we ask the government to clarify its action with regards to addressing the flaws in the light of the NHRC recommendations.

We feel constrained to say that there is a serious fault in the process of oversight of the activities of the law enforcing agencies if not a total absence of it. There is also a serious lack of accountability of the agencies that point to the overall poor state of governance in the country. Presently the Commission cannot investigate matters where the law enforcing agencies are involved. This needs change.

The report and subsequent statement of the NHRC Chairman must be taken cognizance of and corrective

What was the alternative?

M. FIROZE

IN 2009, the Awami League government embarked on an ambitious plan to eradicate the nation's perennial power shortage on a crash basis. It chose the rental power station, fuelled by Heavy Fuel Oil (HFO), as the model for quick implementation with a good reason. The country's remaining proven gas reserves of 12 TCF (trillion cubic feet) were badly needed for fertiliser production and generation in existing power plants, and there was no ready infrastructure for coal based power generation. Thus, HFO was the only viable option for quickly addressing power shortage. There were two additional advantages in rental power plants. Unlike coal, HFO is readily available fuel on the global spot market and the dispersed, small rental power plants were eminently suited to the country's weak power grid.

By the end of 2011, the government had added an impressive 3,000 MW of generation capacity. This was a success by any measure, but the electricity from the rental power plants had to rely on immense government subsidy. The subsidy burden of Tk. 5,200 crores per annum apparently undermined the success. The government was forced to increase power prices in small steps to reduce the subsidy burden. The howls of protest and indignation from the middle class and intelligentsia were predictable. The government was forced to halt further power price increase but had to go for wholesale power cuts instead to avoid the high subsidy burden. This only further exacerbated a volatile affair.

Electricity is a commodity and key to industrialisation and employment generation and export led growth. Today, we have the capacity to gener-

ate enough power to banish load-shedding but cannot do so due to pricing mismatch in the cost of producing electricity and what is politically expedient price for power. The country loses VAT and corporate taxes due to reduced industrial output.

There has been a great deal of interest and press write-ups on imported coal-fired power plants to generate what is thought to be cheaper power, and talk on why the government did not go for cheaper

Further, unlike HFO, bulk coal is sold on long term contracts. This would mean entering into 30 year contracts, which is the estimated economic lifetime of a coal-fired power plant, with coal mine concessionaires in the major coal exporting countries such as Indonesia or South Africa. This would have meant huge upfront payments to the concessionaire or buying a stake in the mine as most power utilities in the world do. Further, the huge concentrated power of 3,000 MW would have required a

power plant consumes 105 million tonnes of coal in its economic life of 30 years. Therefore, our domestic coal deposits will be able to generate only 16,000 MW for 30 years.

The environmental and economic damage to agriculture from the 30-year mining in a densely populated region will be beyond the benefits of generating electricity. The human cost of moving possibly millions of people from their ancestral homesteads is beyond any economic reckoning. Worldwide successful and sustainable mining occurs in arid regions of sparsely populated nations such as Australia and Canada in the developed world. Among developing nations Brazil and China have economically successful mining operations though not without serious environmental consequences. Only Indonesia has been successful in its mining industry. In India, which has the 3rd largest deposit of coal in the world, mine expansion has ground to a halt due to a motley combination of Maoist insurgency, public interest law suits and popular agitation. Instead, Indian entrepreneurs have relied on coastal power plant with coal imported from South Africa and Indonesia. It was with a good reason our prime minister wisely deferred the coal mining issue.

The rental power plants have created a new generation of Bangladeshi power entrepreneurs who, with active deregulation of the energy industry, will be the basis for an energy sufficient Bangladesh. Our telecom industry is an example of how deregulation and market forces have prevailed to lower costs and a revenue earner for the government rather than a subsidy burden.

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We have the capacity to generate enough power to banish load-shedding but cannot do so due to pricing mismatch in the cost of producing electricity and what is politically expedient as acceptable price for power.

coal power in the first place.

A 1,000 MW coal-fired plant consumes between 3 million to 3.5 million tonnes of coal per annum. If the entire liquid-fuelled rental power capacity of 3,000 MW was generated in 3 coal power plants of 1,000 MW each it would have required over 10 million tonnes of imported coal every year. The present port facilities in the country are completely incapable of handling bulk cargo, leave alone 10 million tonnes of coal. There is no way imported coal fired plants would have been viable without a deep water sea port facility to handle 200,000 tonne bulk coal carriers. By default a coal-based power project would be based in Chittagong near a deep sea port facility. There are plenty of examples of coastal power plants based on imported coal in Japan, Korea and more recently in India.

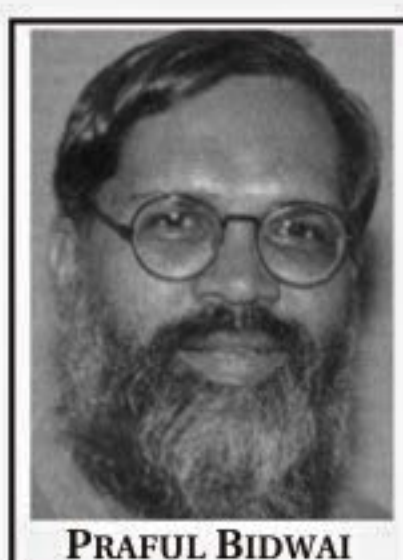
high voltage, of at least 400 Kv, power grid for distributing the power. The cost of building such a grid would have been enormous.

Considering the huge amortisation costs of a deep water port for coal handling and a coal-based power complex and a high voltage grid the very thought of low cost power from coal is a mirage.

Yet there are others who wanted to know why the government did not mine the bounty of "free" coal we have in North Bengal. The total deposits of our domestic coal in all the 5 proven mines in North Bengal is around only 2.8 billion tonnes, which is the thermal equivalent of 37 TCF of natural gas. Of these, the largest reserve of 1.050 billion tonnes in Jamalganj, Bogra, is at a depth of over 1,000 metres and considered not extractable by any currently available technology. A 1,000 MW coal-fired

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Recasting civil-military ties



PRAFUL BIDWAI

ON April 4, *The Indian Express* reported that two Indian army units, a mechanised infantry formation from Hisar in Haryana and 50

Para Brigade from Agra, made an un-notified movement towards New Delhi on January 16.

This "spooked New Delhi" because it happened the night before Chief of Army Staff Gen. V.K. Singh petitioned the Supreme Court amidst bitter contention with the defence ministry over his date of birth.

The suggestion that Gen. Singh threatened the government not-so-subtly shocked many who correctly assume that the army was apolitical and wouldn't question civilian supremacy in this crude manner.

All such speculation is dangerously irresponsible. No protocol or standard operating procedure demands prior notification of sub-corps-level movements. The two units were halted without resistance and quietly returned to base. That's not how coups are staged.

If it wanted to, the army could have landed paratroopers directly into Rashtrapati Bhavan, instead of sending them by road. Or it could have mobilised the thousands of soldiers present in the capital for Army Day (January 15) and the Republic Day (January 26) parade.

That apart, the speculation seriously misunderstands the culture and ethos of the Indian army, which discourage the idea of questioning civilian supremacy, leave alone usurping power. No evidence remotely supports the *Express's* allegations.

However, there's no doubt that relations between the armed forces and the defence ministry have been recently vitiated. Both are culpable for the prevalent suspicion, distrust, intrigue and skulduggery. Besides, numerous factional group-

ings are active in the army, which leak sensitive internal information to the media. Among these is the allegation that the army recently intercepted telephone conversations between high defence ministry personnel.

This has all the makings of a disinformation campaign. There was also the leak of a confidential letter from Gen. Singh to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the army's lack of preparedness in air defences, night-fighting abilities, artillery and

dead-serious matter.

The government has already, prematurely, announced Lt-Gen. Bikram Singh as COAS-designate although he has two court cases pending against him: the first involving a fake "encounter" killing in Kashmir in 2001, and the second regarding Indian troops' misconduct, including rape, during a United Nations peacekeeping mission in Congo in 2008.

Propriety and convention demand that Lt-Gen. Singh shouldn't be so

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other weapons systems.

Such letters aren't unusual. But this leak was instantly linked to the controversy over Gen. Singh's date of birth (DoB). There was no dispute over the DoB till 2006. Gen. Singh was cleared for top-level promotions, with 1951 accepted in army records as the year of birth.

Gen. Singh is a man of high integrity who has sincerely tried to fight corruption. Opinion may be divided over who was responsible for turning the DoB into a controversy, and whether Gen. Singh should have dragged the government to court. But on balance, he has been in the right.

A much greater, and darker, truth lies behind these murky developments: The army is rife with factionalism along caste, community, regional and regimental loyalties, and mired in corruption scandals.

A well-substantiated Supreme Court writ petition by former Navy chief L Ramdas, former Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalaswami and three ex-generals, alleges that former army chief J.J. Singh manipulated the COAS succession process years ago so that Eastern Army Commander Bikram Singh would take over from Gen. V.K. Singh next month. This is a

The manner in which import tenders are framed strongly favours pre-determined sellers, while promoting bribery.

Because the armed forces are shielded from the normal scrutiny of the Comptroller and Auditor General, scams rarely come to light.

Even more worrisome is the erosion of norms which must regulate the conduct of the armed forces in democracy, including their apolitical character, non-interference in policy matters, and civilian supremacy.

Thus, Indian generals now think nothing of making public statements contrary to the government's views or policies on matters such as the Siachen glacier dispute, the world's highest-intensity and highest-absurdity conflict.

Siachen has claimed over 2,000 lives, mainly thanks to frostbite, and driven thousands of soldiers into acute psychological disorders. India and Pakistan came close to resolving the dispute at least three times, including in 1989, 2006 and 2011.

In 2006, Gen. J.J. Singh publicly ruled out the Indian army's withdrawal until its positions on the glacier are marked and recorded. The local commander had journalists flown in to announce that the army wouldn't withdraw barring on its own terms.

Similarly, during last year's debate on the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, and a growing consensus on suspending it in Kashmir because of a dramatic reduction in cross-border infiltration amidst declining militancy, several army commanders lobbied against the move. Some even threatened to stop counterinsurgency operations if the draconian Act is lifted.

Such conduct is unacceptable and must be punished. Or, the armed forces will lose their integrity and credibility in the eyes of the people -- with disastrous consequences for democracy.

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