

Shun hartal, save economy

Stop punishing the people

THE entire nation was held hostage by the three days' continuous hartal enforced by the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its alliance partners that cost the nation immeasurably in terms of loss of life, damage to property and loss to trade and commerce.

Some five persons died and 100 received injuries in hartal-related violence in the last three days. Simultaneously, some 14 buses, private cars and 50 motorcycles were also burnt in three days' hartal.

We will have to count more dead bodies, burnt vehicles and damage to properties, if the opposition make good on its threat to call hartals again.

Though we have no correct estimate on the hartal-related loss to the economy, taking the impacts on domestic trade and manufacture as well as external trade, especially export, into account, it can be safely said that the cumulative loss figure would come to the tune of billions of taka in a single day.

Economy apart, we have no yardstick to measure the sufferings the common people have to go through in consequence of a hartal.

Reiterating our consistent stand against hartal as a political weapon of protest, we share the business community's concern and echo their call to the opposition to shun hartal to realise their demand to get Ilias Ali and his driver back.

We hope the opposition would rather help the law and order agencies, or the government for that matter, to find out their leader.

The government cannot also shrug off its responsibility in taking the opposition into confidence to overcome the crisis.

One needs also to go to the root of the prevailing political culture of mutual distrust and confrontation and be all out to redress it.

The government and the opposition must find ways to reach out to each other, take mutual confidence building measures to resolve their conflicts and spare the people and the economy of the baneful impact of hartal.

Proposed action against railway land grabbers

A commendable move by the minister

THE interim railway minister's proposed initiative against railway land grabbers and his declaration that he will take action against them no matter who they may be, are commendable. It is, however, a huge task, which has been attempted in the past but with little result.

For years now, of the more than 61,000 acres of railway land across the country, thousands of acres -- over 4,600 acres, according to some news reports quoting top level ministry officials -- have been illegally occupied by influential quarters. Moves to recover the land have most often failed due to intervention by these vested quarters which include political leaders, as well as the non-cooperation of government agencies, while in a few cases where the grabbers were successfully evicted, the land was encroached upon again soon after. In addition, there are people pilfering the resources contained in the lands, such as fuel and iron, and selling them illegally.

We appreciate the railway minister's move, but stress the fact that it will be a long process ridden with obstacles, not least of which is the influence of those in positions of power. We hope that the authorities under his directive will be able to follow it through strictly and in a systematic manner. First, the exact amount and locations of illegally occupied land must be identified. Then stern and uncompromising legal measures must be taken to evict the grabbers. This must be done indiscriminately regardless of who the illegal occupiers may be and whoever may attempt to intervene in the process. Finally, the retrieved land must be put to good use under its originally or newly intended purposes to effectively discourage illegal encroachment in future. As with almost every other sector, the valuable resources of the railway sector are being misused and lost through corruption of the powerful and

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 26

- 1564

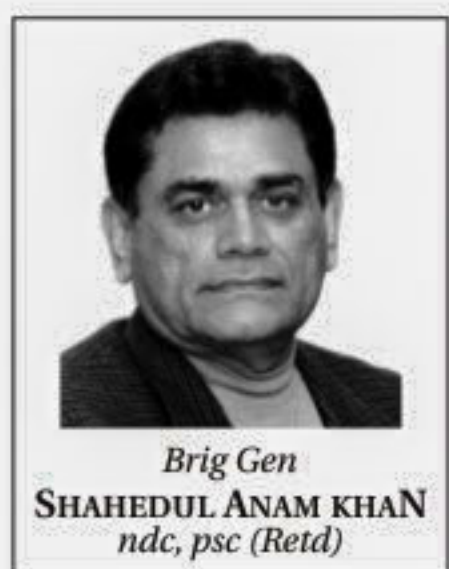
Playwright William Shakespeare was baptized in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England (date of actual birth is unknown).
- 1865

Union cavalry troopers corner and shoot dead John Wilkes Booth, assassin of President Lincoln, in Virginia.
- 1986

A nuclear reactor accident occurs at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Soviet Union (now Ukraine), creating the world's worst nuclear disaster.
- 1989

The deadliest tornado in world history strikes Central Bangladesh, killing upwards of 1,300, injuring 12,000, and leaving as many as 80,000 homeless.
- 2005

Under international pressure, Syria withdraws the last of its 14,000 troop military garrison in Lebanon, ending its 29-year military domination of that country (Syrian occupation of Lebanon).



THE instance s of disappearances , particularly in recent times, of businessmen, politicians of different statuses and opposition party cadres, have been a cause for worry for all of us. And had it not been for the reports in the media on the large number of people that have literally vanished into thin air in the last three years, one would not have been able to comprehend the severity of the matter.

These have been termed as "enforced disappearances" and, according to Amnesty International, "An enforced disappearance takes place when a person is arrested, detained or abducted by the state or agents acting for the state, who then deny that the person is being held or conceal their whereabouts, placing them outside the protection of the law." One wonders whether a government committed to good governance can sit unconcerned when nearly a hundred of its citizens have remained untraced since its coming to power, unless, as is the common refrain, it is involved in these disappearances.

"Enforced disappearances" is an ugly euphemism for abduction. Most of those in Bangladesh "forced to disappear" have never returned, while some of them have turned up as dead bodies. And by the look of it, these abductions, for which the blame is being put at the doorsteps

The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

SUNG-YOON LEE

SPECTACULAR failure though it was, North Korea's latest rocket launching calls for punitive measures from America and its allies. Bad engineering is no reason for complacency; the benchmark for American policy must be North Korea's intent. And for decades, that government has been determined to develop nuclear-tipped long-range missiles that would give it leverage over the United States on a host of issues.

It's predictable that the misfire has triggered over-analysis and scape-goating, with calls for calm and tales of an internal power struggle between "hawks" and "doves" in the new Kim Jong-un government. Others say America and South Korea should re-engage the government in Pyongyang. Both views ignore the fact that Kim Jong-un is following a path of alternating provocations and peace offensives paved by his grandfather Kim Il-sung and perfected by his father, Kim Jong-il.

No government enjoys total unanimity. But the notion that in totalitarian North Korea, a few disgruntled military men might put their foot down and reverse a course of engagement set by their leader is foolish. It ignores the nature of the power structure in the North. For more than a half-century, the Kim clan has kept the military in line through vicious purges, competition that fosters loyalty to the leader, selective rewards and a multilayered security apparatus. While a military clique may one day challenge or even overthrow Kim Jong-un, the notion that the military wields a veto now is a mirage that plays into North Korea's stratagems.

And for those inclined to believe that the North can be persuaded to

The recent 'enforced disappearance' and its aftermath

of the law enforcing agencies, have replaced another abhorrent practice -- crossfire.

The issue of disappearances is one that touches the very fundamental question of personal security and safety. True as the PM says, the state cannot provide protection to every bedroom and nobody wants that ever, given that with the advancement of technology nothing we do or say is private any more, we would like to keep Big Brother away at least from the four corners of our bedrooms. But is it not the state's responsibility to create conditions that would ensure the safety of a

The issue of "enforced disappearances" has invited criticism from outside too. The government must resolve these cases including Ilyas Ali's one way or the other, and quickly too, or else risk further erosion of its credibility.

person in the house at least, and in the case that his or her safety is compromised, the perpetrators are arrested and punished? When it is people's money that pays for the safety and protection for their leaders is it too much for them to ask their leaders to address their safety in return?

Ilyas Ali's case is yet another example of how a sensitive matter has been made light of by indiscreet and callous remarks of politicians from both the AL and the BNP. No sooner he went missing than we found the BNP blaming the government and accusing its agencies of complicity.

As for the government, its handling of the matter could not have been worse. The remark of the PM that Ilyas was put up to it on Begum Zia's advice to create an issue, was very insensitive.

This is the first time that the BNP has resorted to hartal for one of its missing party men, although it claims that many of those that have gone missing belonged to the party. But what was detestable was the fact that Ilyas Ali's driver, who was also abducted along with him, finds no mention in the statements of the BNP leaders - the penalty of being a lesser mortal than his master perhaps.

Granted hartal is a political right and a handy expedient. It has been used in the past, quite indiscriminately sometimes, but when the mechanism to advance one's cause -- that of recovering an abducted person -- results in the loss of innocent lives, makes widows of young wives and orphan of children, does not the cause lose its moral standing? Does not the sympathy that the abductions garner in public mind reduce with the increased sufferings of the public?

The question is will hartal ensure the return of Ilyas Ali and his driver? But one could also ask whether the

BNP was left with any other alternative, given that they have been afforded little political space. There were more anti-hartal processions on the streets of the capital and elsewhere in the country organised by the AL with the police in support chasing off BNP activists, in most places.

As for Ilyas Ali, here we have a situation where a senior opposition politician has gone missing and we have the two parties engaged in mutual accusation. There could be several scenarios in this case. First, he has gone into hiding, for whatever reason. Second, he has been abducted by state agencies. Third, he is the victim of intra-party rivalry.

Without going into the cost and benefit of the exercise it could be said that none of these scenarios is beyond the realm of probability. And it remains the responsibility of the government to find out the missing politician, if nothing else than to disprove the accusations of the opposition. If anything, it has given an opportunity to the opposition to launch a movement, the start of which we witnessed in the first three days of this week -- three days of hartal that the country had to endure -- dawn to dusk.

The issue of "enforced disappearances" has invited criticism from outside too. The government must resolve these cases including Ilyas Ali's one way or the other, and quickly too, or else risk further erosion of its credibility.

The writer is Editor, Op-ed and Strategic Issues, The Daily Star.

Why North Korea's rocket mattered

change its behaviour with inducements, consider this: Except for the invasion of the South in 1950, North Korea has never suffered a lasting or devastating penalty for its many attacks and provocations. On the contrary, it has often been rewarded for false pledges.

From January 1968 to December 1969, North Korea acted with impunity: It sent commandos into Seoul in a failed effort to kill the South Korean president, Park Chung-hee; it seized the United States Navy spy ship Pueblo and its crew, killing one sailor and holding 82 prisoners for 11 months until it got an apology

1976 North Korean guards hacked two American soldiers to death.

In 1983, as North Korea sought talks with America, its agents targeted the South Korean president Chun Doo-hwan, with a bomb in Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar). He survived, but 17 other South Korean officials died. In 1998 North Korea fired a missile over Japan while America, South Korea and Japan were sending energy aid. In 2006 it test-fired a long-range missile on July 5 and staged its first nuclear test three months later. In 2009, it launched a long-range rocket in April and

Now, as Kim Jong-un is believed to be preparing for another nuclear test, the question remains how much longer America and its allies will take before devising a new collective strategy -- one that does not settle for short-term diplomatic gains at the cost of long-term strategic interests.

from the Johnson administration; it shot down an American reconnaissance plane, killing 31 servicemen aboard, on Kim Il-sung's birthday in 1969; and it ambushed and killed four American soldiers patrolling the military demarcation line in October 1969.

A thaw followed in the early 1970s, thanks to American rapprochement with China. Talks between North and South ensued. Kim Il-sung called for diplomatic talks with America. But then North Korea resumed attacks. In 1974 it made another attempt on President Park's life, in which his wife died. In

tested a nuclear device on Memorial Day.

In all of these episodes, North Korea was never penalised in any meaningful way. Indeed, several provocations were followed by blandishments -- rewards, in effect -- in the form of food, fuel and cash from North Korea's risk-averse adversaries in Seoul and Washington.

This record shows that North Korea doesn't respond to either rhetorical hostility or diplomatic civility. Its latest ballistic stunt followed a long pattern of ignoring outside warnings. But the American response should not also be the

usual -- strong on rhetorical condemnation, weak on punitive action and generous in damage-control concessions. North Korea clearly seeks to continue this profitable cycle by dangling before America the possibility of denuclearisation, even as it conducts missile and nuclear tests.

Now, as Kim Jong-un is believed to be preparing for another nuclear test, the question remains how much longer America and its allies will take before devising a new collective strategy -- one that does not settle for short-term diplomatic gains at the cost of long-term strategic interests.

They can start by responding to the failed launching on Friday as if it had succeeded. The Obama administration is correct to cancel food shipments, which were contingent on a halt to missile and nuclear tests. But it should go further and act with its allies to hit the Kim government itself -- by tightening economic sanctions aimed at the privileged few at the top of the Kim dynasty's power structure; by not relenting in that pressure for the mere privilege of talking with North Korea; and by taking new measures to counter the propaganda apparatus with which the government controls the long-suffering North Korean people.

That may not stem North Korea's provocations in the short term. But the alternative is, at best, another half-century of putting up with provocations from the North or, far worse, a major nuclear crisis that ends in a devastating war.