

## CROSS TALK

## Highway to hell

Show no mercy to erratic drivers

WHAT ought to have been a joyous occasion for the extended family of thirteen travelling together to the ancestral home in Sariapur turned fatal, thanks to the rash driving of a bus driver on the Keranigaj road. The latest incident merely goes to highlight what dreadful conditions exist on highways, where accidents like this happen ten a penny on any given month of the year. What is interesting to note is that in this particular incident, passengers aboard the killer bus had repeatedly asked the driver to slowdown but their protestations fell on deaf ears.

And is it altogether surprising to find both driver and helper absconding after the fatal incident? Isn't it how these things are played out in the numerous accidents we bear witness to with clockwork regularity? A closer scrutiny into the circumstances leading to such tragic loss of life all point to some startling similarities in the accident, i.e. more often than not, it is reckless driving that is to blame. This diehard attitude of drivers of bigger vehicles that they are the kings of the road, giving them carte blanche to drive as they please, break as many traffic rules and regulations when it suits them knowing well that they are protected by the high and mighty in government.

Recent studies by the Accident Research Institute of BUET have revealed that accidents, occurring on our roads and highways can be cut by more than 50 percent, were the authorities to put up road dividers. We are hence at a loss as to why such measures are not put into place by the concerned department. Has human life become so cheap that the expense associated with putting up concrete road dividers in the middle of our highways is considered 'uneconomic'? Since the government has apparently tried and 'failed' to bring some modicum of order in how a driver may obtain license from Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, the least we can do is 'physically' divide the roads so that casualties may be minimised.

## Home minister goes smug

Her indulgence to cops doesn't go with the job

DESPITE the glaring instances of police excesses on journalist, lawyers and members of the public in recent weeks, home minister Shahara Khatun claims that police are now performing far better than before.

Setting aside all misgivings, she even recommended that journalists should also admit that they are behaving better now.

We are lost for words at the home minister's comment as this comes from her only a day after some of the members of the police had abused a teenage girl and manhandled her parents in the police club under Kotwali thana. As if that was not enough, they baton-charged the lawyers and journalists who tried to help the victim girl.

Actually, her words sound far more disappointing than the misdeeds the police have been committing with increasing frequency.

This is, however, not her first attempt to pull the wool over our eyes in the face of increasing frequency of excesses by the police. Even on the issue of disappearances that had rocked the nation, she alleged in the parliament that all the disappeared persons were members of criminal gangs.

These are nothing but unabashed attempts by her to portray members of law-enforcement agencies in a brighter light.

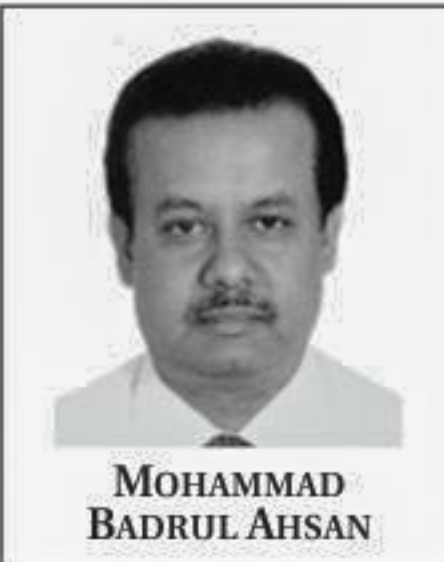
But as the top boss of the police, she cannot wash her hands of some of the serious cases of offence in which members of police force were involved.

While cushioning the police from public criticism for their excesses, she cannot forget that as a disciplined force, the police are obliged to be accountable and answerable to their superiors and through them to parliament.

The government must make the police accountable for their actions. As they deserve to be rewarded for their good work, they are equally liable for punishment if they are found on the wrong side of law.

We, would, therefore, urge her to be careful with her utterances, where if she were to be callous it would only

# Caging of the opposition



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE current state of Bangladesh politics seems like an adaptation of these snatches of a Bob Dylan song: "Sometimes I think

this whole world is one big prison yard/Some of us are prisoners, some of us are guards." The government has put many opposition leaders and activists in prison, but the question is what's going to happen next? Is it going to be a solution unto itself, or is it going to create more problems for us?

History tells us that persecution or imprisonment doesn't quell political opposition, but swells it instead. The British tried to crush opposition to their colonial presence in this sub-continent and only saw it mounting against themselves. The Pakistanis learned nothing but resorted to the same method of suppressing political discontents. Many examples can be cited to make this point: filling up prisons only makes governments morally empty and stokes the political opposition to take their fight to its logical conclusion.

Perhaps mass incarceration of opponents cannot diminish opposition for the same reason it doesn't decrease crime. In 1980, there were about 220 people incarcerated for every 100,000 Americans; by 2010, the number had more than tripled, to 731. Overall, there are now more people under "correctional supervision" in America -- more than six million -- than were in the Gulag Archipelago under Stalin at its height.

But has that put a dent on crime in America? The answer is a resounding no. The same thing is also true for political repression. Sooner or later what is supposedly quashed with

imprisonment and torture gets a life of its own. Afterwards, it's bound to come back with a vengeance. Rulers and governments are toppled with many returns of public furore.

Yet most rulers and governments tend to forget that historical fact. So when this government is arresting hordes of opposition politicians, what does it expect to achieve in the end? Right now the country is undergoing a

the government fears the people there is liberty," he observed. Which of the two is the goal of this government is hard to tell. It's a populist government that came riding on the waves of public adulation. How much of that adulation still exists is a question that it needs to ask itself.

How long does the government expect to keep the opposition politicians in prison? And, after they are



ANISUR RAHMAN

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political stagnation, more or less another period of political turmoil that is reminiscent of past experiences. It is obvious that history repeats itself. Politicians drive that repetition.

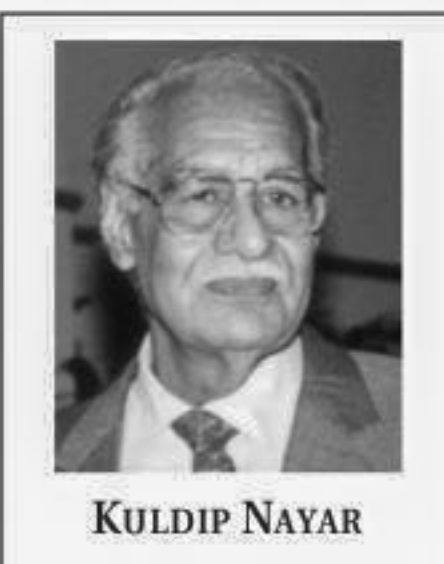
American statesman Thomas Jefferson couldn't have said it better when he drew the line between two extremes. "When the people fear the government there is tyranny, when

released, as and when they will be released, does the government expect them to give up their will to oppose it? Is this going to be a final solution? The answer is hardly so.

May be it's a solution of a kind if the ruling party knows the opposition is never going to return to power. Too bad if it does, because then it will try to exact more vengeance. If the government is thinking that it will never

## BETWEEN THE LINES

# Is India's story over?



KULDIP NAYAR

WHEN a chief minister leads a demonstration in her own state to protest against the hiked

petrol price, it shows the intense feelings over the raise. But it is all too comical to see the chief minister doing so when the government is the authority where the buck stops.

Something similar is happening to India's economy, the ruling Congress angry over the increasing burdens on the people and its government behaving as if it is not accountable. Who is to blame? Was the bloom a mere bubble that has burst? Is the success story over? In a way, it is, if one were to look at the tumbling growth rate from the 8-9% to 5-7% and the beating the rupee is receiving at the hands of the US dollar, touching Rs.56 when it was Rs.45 this January. The decreasing exports and slowing of industry suggests that the moonlight was just a one-evening phenomenon.

Inflation crossing the figure of 10.5% makes one still more pessimist about the future. On the other hand, the reports of bumper wheat crop beyond the storage capacity of silos and mandis are elating. In the same way, the progress in information technology industry and the spectrum (mobiles) is inspiring. The service sector on the whole is doing well. The progress doesn't seem to be fake.

What one can see is that the ventures dependent on individual initiative have fared well. The entrepreneurs have, on their own, propelled the economy upwards despite the

meddling by the government. In fact, in most cases of failure there is only one explanation: the government's bungling. The Manmohan Singh rule did not take remedial measures when the faltering economy required correction. However loud the denial, the policy paralysis and slow decision-making are palpable.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is an economic wizard, but looks like King Canute who had placed his throne near the shore and vainly attempted to command the waves to recede until he almost drowned. The prime minister sees the demolition of India's success story, but does not know how to pick up the pieces or from where to start. The main drawback is his inability to have his way. The recent budget is an example.

The prime minister reportedly proposed two or three measures to Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee to make the budget perk. But Mukherjee did not consider the proposals worth including in the budget. It is an open secret that the union cabinet lacks cohesion. Some ministers are not even on speaking terms. The estrangement between Mukherjee and Home Minister P. Chidambaram has come in the way of taking bold steps. The latter is Mukherjee's predecessor and has different ideas about improving the economy.

The problem arises when Manmohan Singh does not assert himself even when he realises that his

cabinet colleagues are wrong and that the country needs such drastic steps which he had initiated in 1991 when he was the finance minister. He doesn't seem to have his way even in small matters like the distribution of food grains because Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar has his own ideas.

Therefore, the government does not step in when a large quantity (60,000 tonnes) of food grains, some of it as old as 15 years, is rotting while one-third of India's population is going to bed without food. The governments, both in the states and at the centre, have ignored even the Supreme Court's order that food grains should be distributed among the poor and not allowed to rot.

However, the most important reason for the economy's regression is the lack of political stability. Economics cannot be separated from politics. True, the government's own allies are in the way.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who led the protest march in Kolkata, is not in favour of reducing subsidies which run into thousands of crores. Is it the coalition *dharma* that has made the government effete?

The government could have tried to reach a consensus with the BJP. The party, which has more numbers than the Congress in the Rajya Sabha, has been willing to give support to bills relating to insurance, pension and food security. But its complaint is that the Congress is divided on these measures and does not bring the bills to

have to relinquish power, such wishful thinking always has been grist to the mill of political delusion.

Emma Goldman, who was an anarchist known for her political activism in North America and Europe, was shocked after she visited Spain in 1936. The infamous Montjuich prison, where prisoners were subjected to inhuman torture during the Spanish Inquisition in 1897, was once again being used to house ardent revolutionaries. Prisons are unfortunately the landmarks of a country's political plight, tyranny and freedom determined by the number of prisoners who live inside them.

It's not so shocking that our prisons are already miserably crowded. Given the level of corruption, mischief and violence in this country, our prisons should be bursting at their seams. But what is shocking is that our prisons are being packed with political prisoners, people who have allegedly burned buses or thrown bombs on *hartal* days.

In all fairness, how much more guilty are these people of damaging property and disrupting life than bribe-takers and other corrupt people who are plundering this country on a daily basis and threatening its future? That tells us that people who should have been inside are outside. The prisons are crammed with wrong kind of offenders.

How far does the government wish to go with its repression of political opponents? And for how long does it wish to keep them prisoners? While the young members of the ruling party needs to mull over these questions, the older ones should try to remember. What independence are we celebrating if we are still incarcerating politicians in a free country? Those who ruled us before must be wondering what it is that they did wrong.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 1

1215

Zhongdu (now Beijing), then under the control of the Jurchen ruler Emperor Xuanzong of Jin, is captured by the Mongols under Genghis Khan, ending the Battle of Zhongdu.

1670

In Dover, England, Charles II of Great Britain and Louis XIV of France sign the secret treaty of Dover, which will force England into the Third Anglo-Dutch War.

1941

The Farhud, a pogrom of Iraqi Jews, takes place in Baghdad.

1980

Cable News Network (CNN) begins broadcasting.

1990

George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev sign a treaty to end chemical weapon production.

2001

Nepalese royal massacre: Crown Prince Dipendra of Nepal shoots and kills several members of his family including his father and mother, King Birendra of Nepal and Queen Aiswarya.