

## AL and BNP should shun bellicosity

High time for them to settle for dialogue

**L**EADER of the opposition Khaleda Zia in her alliance's massive public rally in Dhaka on Wednesday announced an elaborate political demonstration programme to ratchet up her demand for restoration of caretaker government by the current month.

The programme includes countrywide rallies on December 6, road blockade on December 9, demonstrations in all cities, districts and upazilas on December 23 and 26 with Khaleda Zia leading a climactic procession in Dhaka as alliance leaders do the same in other cities. She has threatened to call a series of *hartal* should her demand for caretaker system go unmet by the current month.

We have appreciated her sparing use of *hartal* thus far showing sensitivity to public detestation of and suffering from *hartal*. We hope to see the trend continue.

We also note a sign of maturity in the opposition's spacing out of its demonstration programme components. Nonetheless, such progressive tie-ups along the programme details do bear some portents of trouble and conflict. The premonition kicks in, when you consider the backdrop of the opposition threatening mounting agitation against the government and the ruling party leaders' bellicose utterances.

Thus we have pleas to make, first with the government and then with the opposition. We think the government should let the opposition programme run its course in due recognition of its democratic right to dissent and try and rally public opinion behind its demand. The government should not be unduly preemptive including making mass arrests prior to a programme or be suppressive on the streets or indeed stage counter-programmes on the same days.

On the other hand, the opposition alliance leaders should emphasise the message of peaceful demonstrations to their activists and have them exercise restraint.

Now is the time for both the ruling party and the opposition to have an undistracted focus on the issue at hand which is thrashing out a compromise formula of a non-partisan interim caretaker arrangement for the next general election.

Recently, a senior BNP leader, Maudud Ahmed, clearly hinted at the opposition joining the January session of the parliament 'without any preconditions.' We ask, why not join now? At the same time, the ruling party without being egocentric should be seized of the intensity of the public mood for a negotiated settlement of the caretaker dispute. Both have a stake in being on the same page at this critical national juncture.

## The highway of dreams

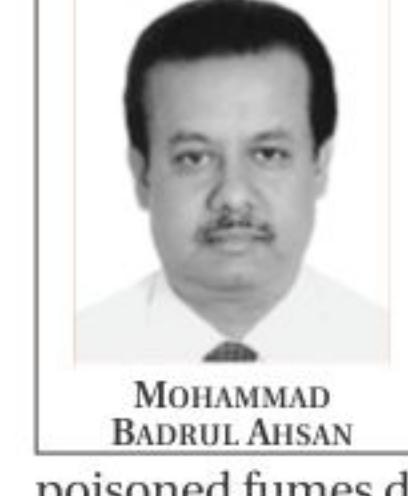
Lack of progress is disconcerting

**T**WO years into implementation, the 193km vital link between Dhaka and the port city of Chittagong has seen 30% of work completion. Yet we are now being told that the government has prioritised the highway expansion project and intends to complete it within a year. Going by newspaper reports, the Roads and Highways Department has completed 80% of the earth-filling work. Apparently, the project ran into a snag since present rules and regulations bar it from taking soil from agriculture lands. One wonders precisely why contingency planning was not done by our planners prior to embarking on such a crucial project. Whatever may be the case, earth-filling exercises remain unattended in certain sections of the highway, particularly Comilla and Daudkandi areas.

This lacklustre performance leaves much to be desired. Despite repeated assurances by the ministry of communication, allegations of illegal toll collection have been raised by contractors in some localities. Indeed, the cutting of hillocks for land by the contractors has run into troubled waters with a Comilla lawmaker despite the fact that the contractor had a permit to do so. Then of course there has been local resistance at various stages of the highway to the removal of physical structures like buildings and houses in certain areas which slowed down implementation. But then all these factors ought to have been taken into account and contingency plans laid out before embarking on the highly ambitious Tk.2,382 crore work.

There is of course no way to backtrack from the expansion work. The horrendous tailbacks on this highway result in thousands of vehicles stranded for hours every day. A five-hour journey between the capital city and Chittagong or vice-versa these days take nearly 15 hours. With nearly two years gone and 70% of the work still undone, it appears a miracle is needed to complete it within 2013. It is really up to the government to get its act

# Between limitless greed and pathetic deaths



MOHAMMAD  
BADRUL AHSEN



HABIBUL HAQUE/DRINKNEWS

**I**n a notorious passage in *Atlas Shrugged* written in 1957, Ayn Rand argues that all the passengers in a train filled with poisoned fumes deserved their fate. A Russian from a prosperous family who emigrated to the United States, Rand apparently believed that the poor deserved to die and the rich deserved unmediated power. Those words rang out in the garment factory in Ashulia last week, when grieving families sifted through fire wreckage looking for their loved ones.

In military sense, some are always expendable in the face of enemy fire. That the garments workers are treated as expendables is obvious from the utter contempt their employers show to safety concerns. They are used as cannon fodder in a price war when the lowest possible cost chases highest possible price in an endless pursuit of profit maximisation. Workers are squeezed for cost, while the factory owners thrive on profit. The underlying principle is that there is no dearth of crows if one has the rice to throw.

Many factory owners will protest. They will say that they have worked hard to build their business and create jobs that didn't exist before. Some are convinced their workers would have died of starvation, but for these jobs. One of them complained to me the media is making a mountain out of a molehill. People die all the time in floods, cyclones and earthquakes.

Civilisation teaches us that nature's cruelty shouldn't make us cruel. It doesn't exonerate someone who takes another life. It doesn't even exonerate parents who kill children raised in their

care. One of the unmistakable signs of civilised people is their consideration for others. Lack of consideration formulates exploitation that foments revolutions and wars.

Exploitation is greed in practical application. The British cut off the thumbs of Muslim weavers in this country to create market for their textile industry in Manchester. Greed motivated the indigo planters to torture the farmers in this country. Akshaykumar Dutta narrates that the indigo planters refused to pay fair price to the farmers and deprived them of their wages. It was the same propensity that led erstwhile Pakistan to discriminate between two wings.

We know that the factory owners take

risks and they handle all the headaches related to their business. But how much does it cost to build fire escapes or keep professional firefighters on their payrolls? It would have cost a fraction of profit to build a separate warehouse instead of having it on the ground floor of the building. Even better, the warehouse could be shifted to one of the top floors and the workers moved to lower floors closer to the exit. Having all three staircases down to the ground floor didn't really show much imagination. When that floor became the source of fire, workers running for life turned into meat going on a grill.

This is not the first incident of fire in a garment factory in this country, and every time it happened in the

past both government officials and industry leaders entered a gabfest. Inquiry committees were formed, promises were made, warnings were issued and then everything returned to square one. Each incident also has been inlaid with a conspiracy theory that foreign hands were subverting the industry. Understood. The foreign exchange earners have everything foreign from raw materials to markets, including people who want to wreck their business.

That is something the factory owners and the government should have sorted out together. Why should the poor workers pay the price? And why look for conspiracy when evidence of chaos is abundant? Foreigners didn't design the building, they didn't approve it and, they, I bet, didn't keep those yarn bales on the ground floor. Who locked up the collapsible front gate of the factory?

Character has a price in this country, but lately BGMEA has put price tags on a few other things. Hundred thousand taka for every dead worker and other compensations for the wounded ones is saucy avowal of a haughty presumption that nothing is wrong when the price is right. BGMEA hasn't yet asked for the arrest of the factory owner or announced his expulsion from the organisation.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the eponymous king laments that even the ocean cannot wash his hands clean of Duncan's blood. That is penance for just one murder. Multiply it by 112 and throw in the wounded, the disfigured, and the disabled. The factory owner has to wash his hands clean of so much blood.

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## Foreign policy in the second Obama administration?

TOUFIQ ALI

**P**RESIDENT Obama has just been elected to run the government of the most powerful country of the world for a second successive term. During the first term, his administration's policies and activities had been under intense scrutiny. But what do we know of his foreign policy objectives during this term? Very little; hence, the question mark at the end of the title.

Immediately after her appointment, Secretary Clinton had stated that there are "...three legs to the stool of American foreign policy: defence, diplomacy and development." Coordination among the three "legs of the stool" enabled Obama to end US troop involvement in Iraq and begin disengaging from Afghanistan.

In stopping the apparent threat of weapons of mass destruction, the administration has managed to get support for economic sanctions against Iran.

Obama's engagement with the Arab countries stems from the belief that while the US can help build more secure societies, only the citizens of those nations can sustain them.

The killing of the US ambassador in Libya is a stark reminder of the implications of an unstable administration that can emerge when an upheaval does not deliver a leader with vision and an ability to govern.

It is uncertain where else the US will pursue its goal of "helping build more stable societies."

Perhaps the greatest challenge has been the handling of long-term issues, such as global warming. President Obama was able to pull off a coup in Copenhagen in 2009, but failed to lead US citizens into making the changes required to tackle global warming.

After all, one can negotiate among countries, but there is no scope to negotiate with nature!

**Quo Vadis?** Secretary Clinton has announced that she will not stay on for the second Obama term. President Obama has to

appoint a successor. Publicly, there is talk of three front runners. Senator Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, has wide experience. Thomas Donilon, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, is a possible choice. Ambassador Susan Rice, currently Ambassador to the UN, has earned the wrath of many for misleading statements immediately after the Benghazi attacks.

How much time does the administration have before it has to articulate its foreign policy? Events may overtake the best of intentions that Obama may have.

On November 14, the Hamas Military Commander, Ahmed Al-Jabari,

was killed in a pinpoint airstrike as he was riding in a car down a Gaza street. In the ensuing days, many were reminded of the Israeli military offensive of 2008-9, involving ground troops as well.

This is a fight between unequals; yet, Israel has singularly failed to

defeat the Palestinians. Through periodic assaults, they destroy any organisation or infrastructure that the Palestinians create after the last destruction. Is the timing of the escalation by the Israelis a coincidence? The Israeli prime minister had publicly supported the unsuccessful candidate -- Governor Romney.

US desire to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons continues to remain a challenge. Israel wants military action, though leaked US intelligence and IAEA reports indicate that Iran may still be many, many years away from developing an effective, deliverable nuclear weapon.

Economic sanctions are clearly taking a toll on the Iranians, particu-

larly women and children, but it is uncertain if this will be enough to break their spirit.

Syria remains a powder keg. Perhaps the government of President Assad may be able to hold out for some more time, unless the opponents get greater external support. By now, the US has sufficient lessons from the experiences in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia to guide them in handling the Syrian problem a little more deftly.

The Obama administration has already taken a positive plunge in economic affairs. Secretary Clinton stated recently that US foreign policy is being re-oriented to promote American economic interests after Washington was tied down by two wars in the past decade.

**Does Bangladesh have reason for hope or concern? Given the US emphasis on economic issues, the prospects for continued US-Bangladesh engagement are as bright as ever. Occasional hiccups have been observed. There is no reason to assume that the partnership cannot be enhanced, if relations are handled with maturity and understanding.**

She acknowledged that global leadership now depends on economic strength, and that even non-military powers are gaining clout, less because of the sizes of their armies than

because of the growth in their GDP.

Secretary Clinton's recogni-

tion of the economic impact of two decades of war is reassuring. The US has over \$16 trillion of public debt, which is just about the same as its total GDP (Bangladesh's debt is 23% of the GDP). In trade of goods and services, the deficit in 2011 was a staggering \$559 billion. It is vital for the world, particularly for Europe, that the US climbs out of the economic quagmire it is in today.

Obama's first trip abroad was to Asia; the US is building relationships that will help them in the immediate-to-medium term. The Chinese GDP has already reached half that of the US', and the middle-class there is

acquiring money and consumer preferences that the US can exploit.

Other rapidly-developing countries in Asia also look promising for US businesses.

And, what role will Myanmar occupy in US foreign policy? Obama's visit to Myanmar was not just for a photo with Aung San Suu Kyi. Myanmar has been under Chinese influence for decades, and the West is now aggressively courting the country's leaders. The Chinese, despite their pronouncements to the contrary, must surely be concerned about this turn of events.

Does Bangladesh have reason for hope or concern? Given the US emphasis on economic issues, the prospects for continued US-Bangladesh engagement are as bright as ever. Occasional hiccups have been observed. There is no reason to assume that the partnership cannot be enhanced, if relations are handled with maturity and understanding. A key question is whether the US will be prepared to help an energy-starved country such as Bangladesh with technology that will help us.

Will major-power rivalry in and around Myanmar affect us? The interests of both the West (and India) as well as China are too deeply entrenched to permit a quick resolution to the competition there. Bangladesh will have to play its cards, which are being revealed gradually, very carefully. As with any opportunity, there are risks; how we manage them will determine our benefits.

It is difficult to make predictions in an environment where the parameters are yet to be defined. From what is explicit, we need to take seriously Secretary Clinton's remarks on economic issues dominating US foreign policy in the second Obama administration. This is good for the US, and desirable for advancing peace and prosperity in the world.

At the same time, one has to be careful that conflagrations, such as the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict, do not derail the objectives of US foreign policy of the new administration.

The writer, a former Secretary and Ambassador, is now Chief Executive, Bangladesh International Arbitration Centre.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 30

1947

1947-1948 Civil War in Mandatory Palestine begins on this day, leading up to the creation of the state of Israel.

1967

The Pakistan Peoples Party is founded by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto who becomes its first Chairman.

1981

Cold War: In Geneva, representatives from the United States and the Soviet Union begin to negotiate intermediate-range nuclear weapon reductions in Europe.

1995

Official end of Operation Desert Storm.