

Hartal disguised as blockade

Opposition is punishing the people

THE BNP-led 18-party opposition alliance's eight-hour road blockade gets underway today. Effectively, all the accesses to Dhaka city will be blocked leaving the whole country disconnected from the capital. Citizens have been advised, without giving them any freedom of choice whatsoever, that they keep vehicles off the road, not even ride rickshaws during the siege hours.

This is pure and simple hartal disguised under the label of road blockade. It's not only tantamount to an act of deceit played on the public, but also subjecting them to all the crippling effects of a hartal.

A shutdown is the most obvious impact of the programme, but the other graver issues relate to possible confrontation at two levels: one, between the law enforcement people and the opposition activists with the Jamaat-Shibir already leaving a trail of damages on property and injuries on policemen earlier on. And two, which is equally, if not more trouble-prone concerns itself with the portents of clashes between the opposition activists and the ruling party elements.

The opposition insists on their democratic right to demonstration and protest which we are fully supportive of. But how can a blockade programme which means use of force can either be democratic or peaceful as a means of protest? Given the whole range of dangers looming large over the 8-hour shutdown coupled with threats and counter threats being traded by both sides, a foreboding sense of anarchy and violence pervades the national psyche.

We are not questioning the rationale of opposition's agitation on the demand for caretaker government. But what we find unacceptable is the methods they are adopting to have their demand met. Why make the people suffer and punish them through taking a line of action that is easily launched by some expedient announcements instead of applying due diligence to settle for peaceable alternative path?

Meanwhile, as we urge both the ruling and opposition parties to exercise maximum constraint, we also call upon the opposition BNP to join the approaching winter session of the parliament and come to grips with the issue of interim caretaker arrangement for the forthcoming election.

Corruption nexus behind garment tragedies

Regulatory bodies found compromising

AN investigative report in the Friday issue of this paper has revealed how safety issues in the garment factories have been seriously compromised by some owners in cahoots with a section of corrupt government officials.

The recent fire tragedy at the Tazreen Fashions in Ahulia itself provides a glaring example of such corruption nexus and its dreadful consequence.

The facts that have come to light from the report are flabbergasting. First, the factory is housed in a structure that has got no permission from the building regulator Rajuk. Worse yet, its design has been found to be faulty. But the question is what were its inspectors doing when this unauthorised eight-storied construction was progressing in that garment belt? Second, the building had no reservoir for water--neither underground, nor overhead. Such mandatory requirement was flouted due to failure of the regulatory bodies.

While a building's emergency exits should lead to the outside, that factory's staircases to the exits have reached the ground floor thereby violating the standards. And as to the infringement of construction rules, the ground floor is not an open space, but one converted into a warehouse clogged with flammable substances like fabrics.

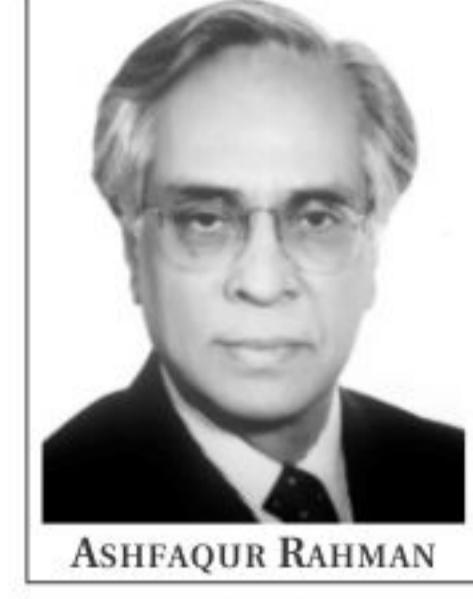
The report detailed how all the relevant building safety codes were flouted one by one and at every step of its construction in connivance with some unscrupulous officials of the regulatory bodies. There have been lapses on the part of Rajuk, fire service and civil defence department, environment department, chief inspector of factories, boiler licensing authority, insurance companies, etc.

And the end result of these cumulative failures of the factory owner and the regulatory bodies was an avoidable tragedy plus the tainted image of garment industry.

The Tazreen garment tragedy should therefore be a lesson enough for the industry and the government to take safety issues in the factories in earnest.

Basically, concrete steps need to be taken to bust the nexus of corruption between the regulatory bodies and

Is the clock ticking for President Assad?



LAST Monday, US President Obama issued a stern warning to Syria. He said: "Deploying chemical weapons against

Syrian rebels is totally unacceptable." He further said: "There would be consequences and you (President Assad) will be held accountable." US intelligence had reported to him that Assad's government was preparing such munitions "for possible uses." It may be mentioned here that after the US and Russia, Syria has the largest stockpile of chemical weapons in the world. They are widely dispersed inside the country. Many of the more destructive ones are in deep bunkers around the capital, Damascus.

The warning from Obama came after it had become clear that the "rebels," who are a disparate group of Syrian dissidents, foreign interventionists, etc. under the common umbrella of the Free Syrian Army, have made significant advances in Syria, raising questions about President Assad's ability to stay in power.

So is the clock now ticking for Assad? Should he be packing his bags and taking the first flight out to an exiled life or should he hunker down like Saddam of Iraq or Ghaddafi of Libya and be caught like them in some manhole or perhaps in a sleazy sewerage pipe?

Let us recall how all this trouble started in Syria. In March 2011, in a small Syrian city called Deraa, 15 children were arrested and reportedly tortured by security forces for writing graffiti on a wall. Initially, the locals there took to the streets calling for the children's release. At the same time they called for democracy and greater freedom for the people of Syria. Assad's government responded by opening fire, killing four people. Next day, when the four were being buried, security forces shot at the mourners and killed another person. The general people were shocked and soon the

trouble spread like wildfire throughout the country. Since innocent people were being targeted, a large number of Syrians demanded that President Assad resign.

But the protests against Assad and his security forces do not yet have the support of all the people of Syria. President Assad is a Shi'a Alawite. With him are Christian minorities and other minorities who have been persecuted in the past for their beliefs. They know that if Assad goes, fundamentalist Sunni forces may take charge and exact revenge on them.

The United Nations had sent peace monitors to Syria in April this year, but they pulled out due to the dangerous situation on the ground. The UN has also not been able to send UN troops there to separate the combatants as all the member countries of the UN could

As the clock ticks away, one must understand that it is not necessarily popular forces fighting for democracy in Syria. It is an international coalition to overthrow a government allied to Iran. This is being done to realise new US geopolitical objectives in the region. It is also to perhaps diminish Shia influence in the Middle East.

not agree on the arrangements. Russia and China have also blocked moves in the UN in this regard by the US and others. To date, 40,000 or more civilians and military personnel have been killed. The Free Syrian Army has also grown in strength and experience. The Syrian government has lost control of several key towns and the rebels are also closing on the capital, Damascus. The clock is ticking and therefore it seems to be a question of when and not if Assad will go.

But does the Syrian story end here? Of course not. We must know the role of various countries, their interests in Syria and what they are doing to worsen the situation or alleviate it.

The US and its Nato allies see Assad as waging a "one sided," murderous war against his own people who are simply seeking

democracy. They, therefore, want a regime change to promote democracy. But in truth, democracy may not have anything to do with the US objective in Syria. If it is so, then it should first seek such change in autocratic regimes like in Saudi Arabia. This country and Qatar are both financing and arming the "rebel opposition" in Syria.

China and Russia learned a bitter lesson after agreeing to support a no-fly zone in Libya. They were forced to accept an extension of the time for the no-fly beyond what was authorised by the UN. They have exercised their right three times to veto US measures to escalate the conflict in Syria. Both the countries want a negotiated solution. They want a ceasefire first, followed by talks and then reforms. President Assad agrees to this proposal but the rebels, taking the cue

from Washington, want a quick regime change. They therefore reject talks.

In fact, the US and its allies want regime change for two interlocking reasons. First, the US has adopted a new defense doctrine called "pivot to Asia." It wants to secure a geopolitical position in the Middle-East as it prepares to move to Asia to contain rising China and reduce Russian influence in Euro-Asia. In the last ten years, Iran has also taken a lead role in refashioning the geo-politics of the Middle East. It has wrested Iraq out of Sunni hands and brought it under Shi'ite control. So if Assad, an Alawite Shia, is dethroned, Iran will lose a major supporter in the Middle East. Iran is therefore working assiduously to keep Assad in place.

The second reason for the US to be concerned about Assad remain-

ing in power is because Iran will continue to play the Shia card. This will restrict the power of the Sunni regimes in the Middle East. The Shias will be playing a larger regional role, which the US is allergic to, with Iran in control of many policy decisions. So, for the US, the target is containing Iran and not necessarily Syria. It will do all it can to clip away at anything, including Syria, that enhances Iranian power. Obama's immediate goal is perhaps to break up the close relationship between three contiguous Shia-led countries, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

The "regime change in Syria" coalition now includes most of the Sunni Arab countries as well as non-Arab but Sunni Turkey. The US is lurking behind these countries to give the final blow to Syria that will get rid of Assad. Curiously, Hamas, the militant organisation that controls Gaza Strip in Palestine, had in the past received immense help from Syria. But with the coming to power of President Morsi in Egypt who, in the past, belonged to Muslim Brotherhood and aligned to Hamas, is now in favour of a regime change in Syria. A particular branch of Hamas is likely to benefit much if Assad goes.

The Syrian dynamics can be better understood if one understands that much of the Free Syrian Army and its commanders, who are working for the imminent fall of Assad, are really not Syrians but Iraqi Sunnis.

So, as the clock ticks away, one must understand that it is not necessarily popular forces fighting for democracy in Syria. It is an international coalition to overthrow a government allied to Iran. This is being done to realise new US geopolitical objectives in the region. It is also to perhaps diminish Shia influence in the Middle East. In this case, democracy and human rights are peripheral reasons. Let us see which way the wind blows for Assad.

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COP18 and UK investment

EDWARD DAVEY

AS things stand, the world is plainly not on track to keep the global temperature increase from climate change below 2°C, which is generally regarded as global warming's danger threshold.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said last week that at best, current commitments would take us somewhat short of half way towards a climate safe trajectory; and a World Bank report published the same week showed some of the dangers of a world warmed by 4°C. Anyone who engages seriously with the science is right to be concerned.

But I would identify four reasons to be hopeful. First, if we act we can still avert climate change's worst impacts. Both the UNEP report and an International Energy Agency report published the week before said that time was running out, but that 2°C is still within reach if we can muster the political will.

Second, the international process may be slow, but it is delivering. Since the Copenhagen summit in 2009, countries representing 80% of global emissions have made economy-wide pledges of action. We agreed at Durban last year to work to a 2015 deadline for negotiating a new legally binding global deal, and I believe that it is reasonable to aim for step-by-step progress towards that deal, beginning in Doha.

In addition to agreeing a high level work-plan towards the 2015 global deal, I want to see some con-

crete actions to reduce emissions before that, adoption of a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol with robust accounting and transparency arrangements for those not in Kyoto, and to give developing countries comfort on the continuing provision of finance.

Third, we have seen serious action by many countries, including some of the big emitters. Globe International has reported that legislation is moving forward in all major economies. Brazil has reduced deforestation by around two-thirds since a peak in 2004.

Korea is spending 2% of its GDP on the low-carbon economy. China has embedded energy efficiency and renewables targets in its latest five-year plan, and is testing carbon markets in seven of its provinces.

In the UK, our Carbon Budgets provide a clear pathway to our 2050 target of an 80% emissions cut. We are acting on energy efficiency and smarter infrastructure. And I have recently introduced an Energy Bill which will give investors and industry the attractive framework and the certainty they need to deliver the huge infrastructure investment that the UK's energy sector needs.

As a result, we are on track to meet the milestones set by the EU Renewables Directive and to deliver enough renewable generation capacity to source 30% of the UK's electricity from renewables by 2020.

In the EU, I will continue to argue next year that going from a 20% emissions cut in 2020 to 30%, adopting longer term targets in 2030, and a renewed focus on the benefits of the Green Economy will provide the clarity and confidence

so many of our businesses are demanding of us.

Fourth, this action is underpinned by important changes in the real economy. According to Bloomberg, global investment in renewables outstripped fossil fuels for the first time last year. We are seeing new renewable energy technologies

break into and compete successfully in the market place. Solar PV has averaged 42% annual growth globally over the last decade; onshore wind has averaged 27%.

In some markets, some solar technologies have come down in price by as much as 75% in only three years, and are now cheaper than fossil fuels in many parts of Africa and south Asia. Companies such as Unilever, Vodafone, Walmart and

Kingfisher are setting ambitious targets to make their supply chains more sustainable. This isn't just a marketing ploy: rising resource scarcity and climate stress means that sustainable, resilient production makes good business sense. As we saw in Rio earlier this year, businesses are now setting the agenda for governments.

I am looking to build on the leadership of such companies with a major new programme to address the drivers of deforestation. On Thursday, at an event hosted by HRH the Prince of Wales, I set out plans for working with the private sector and rainforest countries so that the timber and foodstuffs we buy do not cause deforestation. And alongside the US, Norway, Germany and Australia I committed jointly to accelerating our efforts to tackle deforestation, to have a chance of staying within 2 degrees.

The UK played a significant role in securing commitment in Durban last year to negotiate a new legally binding deal by 2015; and we are not letting up in our efforts. Tackling dangerous climate change is a complex task, but in the UK we are determined to rise to the challenge, working together with all Parties at the UN towards our shared goal of limiting temperature rise to 2 degrees, and preventing the worst effects of climate change.

The writer is the British Energy and Climate Change Secretary.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 9

1946

The Constituent Assembly of India meets for the first time to write the Constitution of India.

1969

United States Secretary of State William P. Rogers proposes his plan for a ceasefire in the War of Attrition; Egypt and Jordan accept it over the objections of the PLO, which leads to civil war in Jordan in September 1970.

1971

Indo-Pakistani War: The Indian Air Force executes an airdrop of Indian Army units, bypassing Pakistani defences.

1987

Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The First Intifada begins in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.