

## CROSS TALK

## Hartal taking a severe toll of the economy

*Business leaders for immediate halt to the trend*

**H**ARTALS are falling into a pattern, something we had dreaded in the past, but the nightmares seems to be looming. Apprehensions are rife that our leaders are pushing us down the slippery slope to a tunnel without any light like it happened at the fag end of 2006.

Public opinion has palpably swung for an immediate stoppage to all the utterly counter-productive and lose-lose options that the opposition political parties are taking. Simultaneously, lack of initiative from the government side to engage the opposition in a talking mode coupled with provocation and intimidation from the ruling party have only exacerbated the situation.

Business and economy being the most hurt, FBCCI has put out a clarion call to find an alternative to hartal. They are elected on party lines and should, therefore, have their way with political party leaders. They should press this into service now.

A deteriorating law and order scenario, transport blockade and dysfunctional ports are surefire impediments to industrial productivity, backward and forward linkages, import of raw materials and export of finished goods.

The aggravation in security situation and political rejection of the primacy of the economy as well as making the people suffer, are tainting country's image to the outside world. If we don't pull back from the extremist political programmes, we would not only dampen local enterprise but also lose out on international business.

Unfortunately, all this is happening at a time when quite a few developed and emerging economies are showing interest in relocating their investments to Bangladesh for some obvious advantages. If the opportunities bypass us in preference to some other neighbouring countries that would deal a severe blow to our otherwise brightening economic prospects.

The consequences of any more hartal are as clear as daylight. We would, therefore, urge the government side and the opposition to see that they are only a phone call away to engage each other in a discussion to resolve their differences on the caretaker issue. Since both sides have signaled there is an element of flexibility in approaching the interim caretaker arrangement issue, what are they waiting for? It is time they stop counting costs and see the dividends from a little bit of conciliatory sharing of gestures.

## Martyred Intellectuals' Day

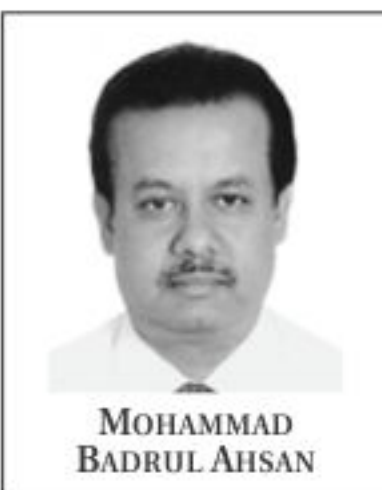
*We recall our debts to them*

**A**S we approach Victory Day we remember with great sadness that on the eve of its finest hour the nation was dealt a heinous blow by death squads of the Pakistani military known as Razakar and al-Badr. It was a vile bid to break the young country's intellectual backbone. The cream of society -- writers, doctors and academics, journalists -- carefully handpicked by the local collaborators two days before the birth of Bangladesh disappeared in the murderous pogrom that ensued on December 14, 1971.

Hence, as we remember that dark chapter in our history, the thought that some of our best minds and most capable people were lost to premeditated murder and the shock of discovering men and women done to death in the killing fields of Rayerbazar the sense of loss is shared by the nation as a whole. What had been missing for the greater part of the last 40 odd years of independence is the political will to bring these murderers to justice.

Mourning as a nation for the loss of loved ones is not enough. For the first time since the birth of Bangladesh, the present government has initiated a war crimes' tribunal with the aim of bringing those guilty of perpetuating such monstrous crimes against humanity to justice. Needless to say, the going has not been easy. That said, the supreme sacrifice made by millions in the quest for freedom must take precedence over all obstacles put in the way of justice that must be delivered. And only when that task is accomplished will we be keeping faith with our martyred intellectuals and all the millions who died in 1971 so that the rest of us could live in freedom and

# Being victors without victims



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**R**USSIAN philosopher Ivan Ilyin, who said that life was worth nothing without victory, led an investigation into the

causes of the Russian revolution. He had termed the revolution as a tragedy and explained that "the weak, damaged self-respect" of Russians had created mutual distrust and suspicion between the state and the people. The authorities and the nobility constantly misused their power, and they did so by subverting the unity of the people. Ivan then gave his startling conclusion. The revolution didn't happen due to inequality of people. It happened because the educated upper classes didn't give spiritual guidance to the uneducated lower classes, which was their duty.

In this month of victory, we have every reason to think that our lives are worth living. We are a proud nation that fought a war and liberated this country. But there is something about us that has been increasingly snapping. Nothing is wrong in being a politically divided nation that we are. Even the Americans were divided last month when they elected the next president for their country.

Mature nations get divided, but come back together as quickly. That hasn't been true for us. Our divisions have made us more divisive. The events of the last few days have proved that we are like

Rumpelstiltskin. The character from a German fairy tale, in a rage, drove his right foot so far into the ground that it sank in up to his waist; then in a passion he seized the left foot with both hands and tore himself in two.

Many of us are worried if this country is heading for a similar climax. I would like to believe it's but an extreme view marinated in despondency. But one cannot deny that our differences are growing wider and deeper.

The rift is getting bigger. We are fiercely drifting. What this nation faces today is called the Spotter's Dilemma.

Spotters are people who clean stains on clothes. They are eager to remove a stain, but they must be careful that they don't damage the fabric. Most stains can be removed if treated quickly, which become permanent if left untreated. If we talk about 41 years of victory and 42 years of independence, we must also talk about the stubborn stains of our misguided politics that have been festering like an open wound.

Last Sunday, that wound bled again. Ruling party activists hacked to death an innocent pedestrian because they thought he was an

enemy. Frame by frame it showed how stubbornly political hatred has stained our conscience. The victim looked just like those who assaulted him, young of age and identical in features. The assailants and their victim resembled two sides in a feuding family. Yet the killers kept on hitting him with cleavers and sticks as if it was for them a fight to finish.

If the leaders were watching on television, we don't know what must

have gone through their minds. Did they clap or did they roar as if it was an episode of the fighting game series Mortal Kombat? Were they trying to assess how their fighting machines were hitting targets like the American commanders do from their command centre when drones strike faraway scenes of engagement?

In the creepiest way possible, the killing was reminiscent of another day in our history. On October 28, 2006 we watched the horror of a similar madness when a man was beaten to death and his killers danced on his lifeless body. These may be sneak previews of a coming attraction. Spark to spark starts a conflagration.

Who is to blame for it? Not the

**In two days time we shall celebrate our 41st Victory Day. What are we going to celebrate? Is it the freedom from subjugation, or the freedom to subjugate? US politician Harriet Woods explains the difference. "You can stand tall without standing on someone. You can be a victor without having victims," she said.**

# Israel worried at Palestine's diplomatic victory

MAHMOOD HASAN

**O**N November 29, 1947 the second session of the UN General Assembly passed a Resolution -- A/Res/181(II)A -- to create the state of Israel by breaking up Palestine.

Sixty five years later, on November 29, 2012, the 67th session of the General Assembly adopted another Resolution -- A/Res/67/19 -- granting Palestine "Non-Member Observer State" status by an overwhelming majority.

It may be recalled that at the 66th UNGA (2011), PNA President Mahmoud Abbas applied to the UN to recognise Palestine as a "full member." That initiative was shot down (vetoed) by the Americans at the Security Council. Abbas then decided to achieve "non-member state" status, despite fierce opposition from Israel and US.

Let us examine the implications of the Resolution.

In 1974 the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was recognised by the United Nations as "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian People" and was admitted as "Non-State Observer" (Resolution: A/Res/3237 (XXIX). The PLO did not have "legal identity" and was treated as an "entity" without voting rights.

The latest Resolution recognises Palestine as a "Non-Member Observer State." The word "State" has made all the difference. It is now a "legal identity." But as an observer, Palestine will have no voting rights. Yet there is a significant change -- it has attained "statehood" recognition. This Resolution when read with the other UN resolutions will mean that Palestine is a sovereign state under occupation by Israel.

According to Oxford University Professor Guy Goodwin Gill, the UN Resolution will give legitimacy to Palestine during the peace talks with Israel. It will actually have legal consequences that could make significant impact on the ground. Beyond the diplomatic weight it gives the Palestinian leadership a

state recognised under international law, and can benefit from rights such as (i) right to self-defense, (ii) sovereignty over its land, and (iii) membership to international organisations and treaties.

The argument Israel has so far used to counter allegations of war crimes is that the Geneva Conventions do not apply in Gaza and the West Bank -- because these are not "state sovereign territories." Now that Palestine is a "state," Israel's argument will be completely invalidated.

Palestine can now ask for membership of the UN Human Rights Committee and International Court of Justice, and sign the Rome Treaty of the International Criminal Court. It can seek redress to Israeli atrocities in Gaza and the West Bank.

**There is no doubt that the latest UNGA Resolution on Palestine will change the political discourse in the Middle East dramatically in the coming days. During the past 65 years the people of Palestine have been and still are in wilderness without their state, suffering brutal aggression from Israel. The world has not forgotten that Palestinians were a nation with a state. The creation of aggressive Israel in 1947 dispossessed them of the state. It is time the Palestinians regained it.**

Palestine has already become member of Unesco and may apply for membership of other UN organisations. In the words of an Israeli diplomat, Palestinian membership of ICC would open a "new arena against Israel in international fora." This is where the worries of Israel and its guardian-ally, the United States, begin.

The newly attained status also brings heavy obligations upon the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). It has to ensure good governance and human rights to its citizens, and will be subjected to routine monitoring by organisations such as the Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Transparency International. Above all PNA will have to unite all Palestinians (Gaza, West Bank, and

Palestinian Diaspora) and achieve democratic legitimacy by holding long deferred elections.

The voting pattern on the Resolution says where the UN member states stand on the question of Palestine. More than two-third of the members -- 138 -- voted in favour of the Resolution, while 9, including Israel and the US, voted against and 41 abstained. If one looks into the population of the 138 countries that voted in favour, it reveals that more than 95% of the world population is in favour of the Palestinian state.

The Western media dismissed the new status of Palestine as "symbolic" as there was no change on the ground. Worried Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu knows that it is not symbolic. In a

farmers, workers, beggars or people on the street. Instead, able-bodied men and women, who have education, clout and money, those who need power and those who need positions, those who treat this country like a proprietary pie for their fidgeting fingers, are responsible for it. What Ivan found wrong with the upper classes of Russia is certainly showing through these privileged people.

In their speeches, interviews, analyses, discussions, seminars, workshops, roundtables, writings, presentations, sophistication and sophistry, the upper classes of this country are misguiding their countrymen. They are deceiving and dividing their fellow citizens, usurping this country's future to build their own. Certainly, a day of reckoning is long overdue.

In two days time we shall celebrate our 41st Victory Day. What are we going to celebrate? Is it the freedom from subjugation, or the freedom to subjugate? US politician Harriet Woods explains the difference. "You can stand tall without standing on someone. You can be a victor without having victims," she said.

Forty-one years later our victory rings hollow. The martyrs didn't give their lives so that nothing should change between victors and their victims except that they speak the same language.

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These developments have helped Hamas and Fatah to narrow their differences.

Israel goes for elections in January 2013. Netanyahu's Likud-led Right wing coalition does not seem to understand that the long-term price of not ending the occupation actually endangers Israel's survival. Professor Carlo Strenger of Tel Aviv University commented: "Netanyahu keeps behaving in a way that profoundly contradicts the values of the club of the Free World. His disregard for international law and individual human rights of Palestinians simply doesn't square with the standards of the Free World."

Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian prime minister, said in an interview: "The question is, where do we go from here and what does it mean? The sooner the tough rhetoric of this can subside and the more this is viewed as a logical consequence of many years of failure to move the process forward, the better." He said nothing would change without deep American involvement.

It will not be easy to get the peace negotiations going on again, after this diplomatic debacle for Israel. The first session of "Final Status Negotiations" was held in Washington in September 2010 between Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu. Since then, there has been no follow-up. President Obama needs to bring the two leaders again to the table as quickly as possible and deliver on the two-state solution.

There is no doubt that the latest UNGA Resolution on Palestine will change the political discourse in the Middle East dramatically in the coming days. During the past 65 years the people of Palestine have been and still are in wilderness without their state, suffering brutal aggression from Israel. The world has not forgotten that Palestinians were a nation with a state. The creation of aggressive Israel in 1947 dispossessed them of the state. It is time the Palestinians regained it.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 14

**1939** Winter War: The Soviet Union is expelled from the League of Nations for invading Finland.

**1946** The United Nations General Assembly votes to establish its headquarters in New York City.

**1971** Over 200 of East Pakistan's (now Bangladesh) intellectuals are massacred by the Pakistani Army and their local allies. Bogra is liberated.

**1981** Arab-Israeli conflict: Israel's Knesset passes *The Golan Heights Law*, extending Israeli law to the area of the Golan Heights

**2003** President of Pakistan Pervez Musharaf narrowly escapes an assassination attempt.

**2008** President George W. Bush makes his fourth and final (planned) trip to Iraq as president and is almost struck by two shoes thrown at him by Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi during a news conference in Baghdad.