

As we observe Victory Day

We must focus on the future

IT is a remembrance of freedom's dawn yet once again. We stand on the threshold of the forty second year since achieving independence in the expectation that the goals for which we went to war against the Pakistan occupation army in 1971 will have come to fruition. It may well be argued, and with justification, that four decades and more are long enough a period for a nation's objectives to be attained. And yet, as we observe Victory Day today, we cannot but be assailed by the sad thought that all too often in all this time, our aspirations as a people have been rudely ridden roughshod over. If it has been extra-constitutionalism which has subverted our democratic hopes, the inability of democratically elected administrations to provide good governance to the nation has stymied our dreams of a just, equal society based on transparency and accountability. It is these thoughts --- and more --- which must be our predominant concern today.

But for all the worries about the nature of politics we have seen dominate the state, there are the positive aspects of life which have given Bangladesh a distinctive flavour, of a kind that cannot but impress the world outside our frontiers. In the field of culture, our drama and music, based on a heritage going back a continuum of time, have created a distinct niche for themselves. In the world of writing and aesthetics, authors have emerged in refreshing droves of creativity, to convince us that this nation remains a symbol of poetry and story-telling, much as it has through the ages. In the economic arena, despite the negative politics which has kept our spirits low, there has been progress across an entire sectoral spectrum. Our garments, in spite of recent tragic incidents, whether organized or accidental, have given the national economy a strong foundation. Abroad, our men and women have worked terribly hard in various countries, sending home hard-earned remittances that have helped their families and given the national economy a certain spurt.

On Victory Day this year, therefore, our expectations tend to rise a little higher given what we have achieved so far. The most significant of those expectations concerns the nature of our politics. For Bangladesh to redeem the pledge it made to itself back in 1971 --- of ensuring a secular, democratic and egalitarian society for all its citizens -- it is important for its political classes to come together in order to build a consensus on pluralistic, accountable governance for the future. Politics must return to being the art of compromise, away from the spectre of tribalism it has been turned into.

That is the least we can do to honour the three million of our compatriots murdered by the enemy in 1971. And it is what we certainly will need to do if we mean to leave a land of happiness and prosperity for our children.

Bravo, climate heroes!

Their enterprises await replication

THE HSBC-The Daily Star Climate Awards given to four private organisations and one government department on Friday -- for the third year in a row -- has significance far greater than what meets the eye. Recognition of concrete achievements of individuals and organisations showcased some pioneering efforts at local capacity building in facing up to the climatic change challenges.

By rewarding them for their deeds we have not only honoured them but also us. In the process, the nation is benefited, and that is satisfying particularly in a month associated with the climactic phase of our national freedom struggle.

These awards in addition to spurring the achievers on to expanding their own frontiers will encourage others to follow in their footsteps. And, altogether their cumulative contribution to eco-friendly conservation of environment in the face of a phenomenon that threatens lives and livelihoods of millions around the world underlines our commitment to do our part as the international community strives to reach an agreement on reduction of carbon emissions. That Bangladesh, being one of the most vulnerable countries to changes in the climatic patterns, has taken it upon itself to meet the challenges where it can, is an enormously hope-giving sign.

The Butterfly Park Bangladesh Ltd, Kenpark Bangladesh Apparel (Pvt) Ltd, Prokriti O Jibon Foundation, Rural Services Foundation, Tangail Forest Division received the awards for their pioneering role in social business related to climatic effects mitigation ventures. They established the first butterfly-themed amusement park and green factory in garment sector; disseminated knowledge through biodiversity documentary, made renewable energy accessible to remote rural community; and turned predators into collaborators in the conservation of Modhupur forest through associating the community.

The climate heroes have shown that with the right tools we can forge ahead in responding to the challenge of climactic changes. All they need is facilitation from the

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week, political events in Bangladesh had been troubling. First there was the toxic *oborodh* (physical blockade) and then a full day of countrywide *hartal* followed by another one for half a day. In the 21st century such political tactics are not only out of date but also very costly economically. They were orchestrated by the opposition parties including BNP. The government reacted by deploying the police and other security agencies. The ostensible purpose was to contain any public violence and disruption to civic life. But the government party brought out its student front to contain any dissent on the streets. The police in this case stood by when these students took the law in their hands. This was evident when a person was hacked to death during *hartal*, which was recorded by the media but not stopped by the law enforcers. Later, some of the attackers were identified and arrested.

But the greatest indignity was the arrest of the acting Secretary General of BNP, Mirza Fakrul Islam. He was accused of igniting the troubles by asking the public not to bring out their vehicles during the *oborodh*. He was not given bail. This is for the first time that a general secretary of a major political party had to go to jail for what seems to be ostensibly on political grounds. It does not speak highly of the government because government party leaders had cautioned the opposition parties not to take to violence as they would be challenged on the streets by government supporters. It, therefore, seems to many that the government is establishing two different standards of prosecution for the same alleged malfeasance.

But what are the issues at stake that have made the two main political alliances reach for each other's throats? Are the issues so intractable that they cannot start a dialogue on them? The BNP is angry because they think that they lost the last general election because it was rigged. When the next election takes place, they may again get the short end of the stick because it will be held under the government's watch. The Election Commission (EC) remains a weak body and could wilt under government pressure. Analysts think it may not be able to conduct the elections fairly and neutrally.

The government, on the other hand,

Making sense of nonsense

is saying that the BNP wants to disrupt the holding of the trial of those accused of 1971 war crimes by creating an anarchic situation. It says that the opposition is trying to invite unknown "third forces" that would in turn suspend holding of the all-important war crimes trials. The government is pledge bound to the people of the country to hold these trials because it won the last election based on the commitment

do so. They have chosen the street to settle political questions. They say that the government has created an adversarial environment in the parliament, which does not encourage sober elements in the opposition to even suggest that it is time to return to parliament.

Are we, therefore, headed towards anarchy which will cause unnecessary loss of lives, property and prosperity?



STAR ARCHIVE

For both political alliances, time is of the essence. As history has shown, people can be quite unforgiving when their daily lives are continuously disturbed. Political posturing and petty political gains are of no consequence then. A ground swell could indeed be beyond the control of either or both the alliances. So what can we do now to bring sense out of this nonsense?

made in its election manifesto.

So what is the way out of this impasse? Where are the sober elements in both the political alliances who can advise correctly as what to do to defuse the situation? We have noticed an escalation in political intolerance and the impunity with which both the political alliances conduct themselves. Mirza Fakhrul in many ways is an exception to this political genre. He has conducted himself with dignity and has played within political norms. So why would the government charge him unless there are cogent grounds, other than political, to indict him? To many, the developments last week extend beyond their understanding.

Of course, one way out is for the members elected from various parties to sit down in parliament and thrash things out. But the BNP is unwilling to

Indeed, prosperity is vitally at stake. Even with political instability this country has achieved an average of 6% annual rate of growth of GNP over the last decade or so. Imagine, with political stability and vision we could easily have achieved 8% or more growth annually. Does Bangladesh, the sixth largest democracy in the world, deserve this? Is this the way we remember our valiant freedom fighters who gave their lives in the hope that one day this hallowed land and its good people would not wallow in squalor and a dysfunctional political order?

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Path to Asian era

presidential poll next Wednesday. But it is certain that Pyongyang's latest provocation will serve to cement the prospect of Japan's right-wing political forces winning the parliamentary election Sunday.

Pyeongyang's rocket launch, coupled with the possibility of its third nuclear test, will help strengthen Japanese conservative politicians' voices for military buildup. Shinzo Abe, leader of the main opposition Liberal

try would welcome a rearmed Japan as a counterweight to China's growing military assertiveness in the region. His statement, which was not expected to come from the top diplomat of a nation occupied by Japan for three years from 1941, reflects the Philippine government's concerns about Beijing's high-handedness in their territorial dispute over a group of islets in the South China Sea.

China may feel it somewhat awk-

With South Korea and Japan changing governments following China's power transition last month, it may be a time that the three nations and some Southeast Asian countries rethink how they could reduce confrontation and enhance cooperation to usher in the Asian century.

Democratic Party, who is expected to return to the premiership he held for a year in 2006-07, has vowed to seek the revision of Japan's pacifist constitution to have a full-fledged military. Some conservative candidates for the lower house election have gone further to demand that Japan should be nuclear-armed.

Tokyo's push for strengthening its military power and role found an unexpected supporter early this week. Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario reportedly said that his coun-

ward to blame the Philippines and other Southeast Asian neighbours for supporting Japan's military buildup when it is pushing them overboard by laying claim to virtually all areas of the disputed sea. It was also the Japanese public's fear of an increasingly assertive China that has turned them in favour of right-wing politicians with a nationalistic agenda.

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beyond the control of either or both the alliances. So what can we do now to bring sense out of this nonsense?

The first order of things is to be able to gauge the minds of our people before we go into the next general election. Perhaps one way to do this is to amend the provision in our constitution that prohibits members of parliament from crossing the floor. A member who is aggrieved by the political behaviour and actions of the parliamentary leaders of his party should be able to take the side from where he or she can express what the people of his or her constituency want or desire.

The second order is to reconsider the constitutional ban on holding referendum. The people should be allowed to say "Yea" or "Nay" on serious issues that bedevil the country today. For example, the issue of caretaker government needs to be settled. Referendum will allow the political parties to get clear mandates on the issues. The people in general will know where the voters stand.

The third order is to begin the process of healing among the political parties. This can be done simultaneously with the other actions. We must ask both the alliances to build confidence in each other both inside and outside parliament. There are issues on which both the alliances are working in tandem and hold bipartisan views. The issues may be innocuous but, in essence, quite vital to our national interest. First is the consequence of climate change. As all the people will be affected by climate change, our political parties speak with one voice. The other issues are women's empowerment and poverty alleviation. These have much to do with the welfare of the people, which is essentially the business of politics.

We do not want that a few disgruntled and frustrated politicians should lead us into the wilderness. They have a limited agenda and are not worth our general interest. So let right thinking politicians, our dynamic civil society and our media lead the charge and help create a new era of political engagement among the various political parties. Let them set new guidelines of correct "political behaviour" that suit our national genius. Let these guidelines be deliberated upon, questioned, and a basic consensus built up. This could take place in the parliament, in the courts, or even in the public forum. We now have to make sense out of this nonsense.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 16

1957 Sir Feroz Khan Noon replaces Ibrahim Ismail Chundrigar as Prime Minister of Pakistan.

1971 End of Bangladesh Liberation War. Mitro Bahini takes Dhaka. Pakistan army in East Pakistan surrenders to Mitro Bahini represented by Lt. Gen. Jagjit Singh Aurora of the Indian army faction of the military coalition.

1979 Libya joins four other OPEC nations in raising crude oil prices, having an immediate dramatic effect on the United States.