

Concern over Rohingyas' plight

Myanmar should heed the UN advice

EXPRESSING serious concern at the difficult plight of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the UN General assembly has urged Myanmar government to address the reported abuses of human rights there.

Only last month, the UNGA in a unanimous resolution had called upon the Then Sein government of Myanmar to take affirmative action to bring about improvement in the situation of the Rohingya Muslims including their right to nationality.

Unfortunately, even a purely humanitarian appeal was termed by the Myanmar government as containing a 'litany of sweeping allegations, accuracies of which have yet to be verified.'

There have been outcries from the international humanitarian bodies, human rights groups, some governments in Europe and North America over the issue.

Such pressure from the international quarters should persuade the Myanmar government, which is on a democratic path, to treat Rohingyas fully and squarely as their citizens.

Actually, communal riots that broke out in the Rakhine state last June killed a few hundred Rohingya Muslims and over a hundred thousand were displaced.

The reports about which UN has expressed concern and urged the Myanmar government to address cannot be made a short shrift of by the Myanmar government. The truth is that the Myanmar government has rendered the Rohingyas a stateless people under the citizenship act of 1982.

This is ironical in a context where majority in the country follow the Buddhist faith of non-violence and peace.

How long will the Myanmar government continue to disregard world opinion in this manner?

What we recall with some concern is that Nobel laureate and pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been rather equivocal and not come out clearly on granting citizenship right to the Rohingyas.

We urge Myanmar government to respect UN resolution, allow humanitarian aid to reach the victims of riots and consider giving them citizenship sooner rather than later.

Chaotic crossings

Multidisciplinary taskforce and solutions required

ONLY last Friday, a woman was killed at Khilgaon level crossing when her rickshawpuller failed to wait for the gate to open and a train ran her over. Yet, as recent newspaper reports and photo stories have shown, the unbridled chaos and indiscipline at railway crossings across the capital continue unabated, with people and vehicles vying to get ahead of each other by a few seconds -- a few seconds which could cost them their lives.

Friday's incident was hardly the first. A number of people have been killed and injured over the years when they were too impatient to wait for a train to pass, or the tyres of their vehicle or a pedestrian's feet got stuck on the tracks at the wrong time or, for some reason, they simply did not know that a train was approaching. Yet, nothing constructive has been done yet.

Granted, the answer is not easy. The railway system is plagued by a number of problems, including overcrowding, broken tracks and more. But when it is an issue of basic safety, we expect all the concerned authorities -- railway, traffic, engineering, etc. -- to put their heads together and come up with both short- and long-term solutions.

Firstly, the most crucial and dangerous intersections must be identified. Secondly, all crossings should be fitted with large, loud, functioning signals, preferably with a countdown system which will allow people to know exactly in how many seconds the train will be approaching. A longer term solution could be the situating of railway crossings outside the city or, and, where inside it, to go underground. Kolkata with its once deplorable traffic system now under control is an example worth looking at. What is needed is a multidisciplinary task force which will address the issue from all angles and come up with solutions that must then be implemented promptly and

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 27

1979

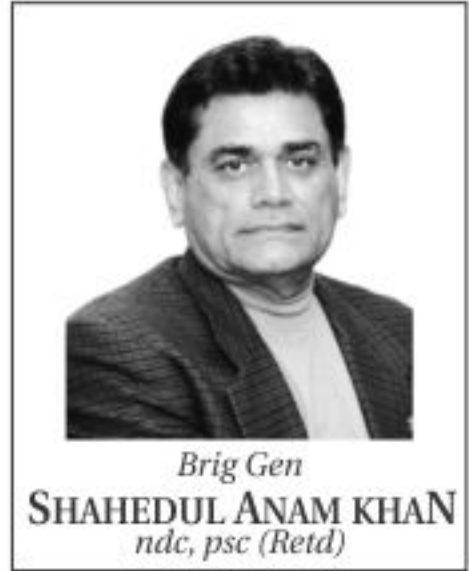
The Soviet Union invades the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

2001

The People's Republic of China is granted permanent normal trade relations with the United States.

2007

Former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto is assassinated in a shooting incident.



As we say good bye to 2012, we want to look at the defining moments of the year that we said good bye to. There may not have been very many defining moments last year but surely the country's politics, more so the prospect of enduring even more *hartal* in the next one year than we had in last four, surely occupy our thoughts, as does the trial of the war criminals, which, because of an unusual development, has become a matter of public discussion. But we will deal with the issue of *hartal* only as for now.

Happily, it was not until March 2012 that we had a *hartal*. This had held out some hope for the public that good sense might have prevailed on the opposition which perhaps has shunned the idea of *hartal* for better options that exposed the people to a lesser degree of disturbance and disruption, like road march. In fact the first *hartal* in 2012 was actually enforced by the government when, in order to foil the BNP rally of March 12, it summoned all its resources as a government, of all the government agencies, and as a political party, of its appendages, to foil the "grand rally" called by the BNP-led 18-Party alliance.

Even more acutely prominent than its failure to disrupt the BNP programme was the public recogni-

tion that the AL was prepared to go to any length, even curtailing the fundamental rights of the citizen, a right that as a government it was the AL's bounden duty to uphold, and make people suffer a state of siege, to tackle its political opponent.

The capital was put under virtual blockade and all forms of exit and entry from and to Dhaka city, except perhaps for air, was totally blocked off for almost 48 hours before the rally was to take place. Even a riverine force was employed by the

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youth wing of the party. A second instance was of the government implementing *hartal*, called by an agglomeration of left front parties, on December 18. We will discuss that later, but at this point suffice it to say that we have come to know that there is good *hartal* and bad *hartal*, the difference enunciated by and dispensed through the homily by the newly appointed home minister.

My own view of *hartal* is that it is a political expedient and legitimate tool at the disposal of political parties, or for that matter any group, to assert, convey, or even extract legitimate demands from the authorities. But like all useful things, imprudent use of it may endanger the very

cause for which it is employed. While we breathe air to live, too much of it in our lungs when we don't need it may endanger our life, certainly it will cause some sort of discomfort to say the least.

While *hartals*, in pre-liberation days, and ones after liberation to oust military rulers, were spontaneous, all that we see now are the "successful" observation of the programmes coerced by violence wrought the previous night or implemented with the help of the law

enforcing agencies. And that brings us to the tale of two *hartals*, one by the 14-party alliance whose road-blockade programme turned into *hartal* on December 9 and the other by the left parties called on December 18, because these have only exposed the government's moral bankruptcy and double standards in addressing political issues and tackling political opponents.

Why BNP has to indulge in pre-hartal violence when it could do without it. The last four years is inexecutable. It fails to realise that its aggro-posture has diluted much of its credentials. However, there is no denying that violence has begotten violence, and that the increasing

shrinkage of political space of the opposition has caused the BNP to assume more violent posture to implement its programmes. The Jamaat's spurt of violence requires a separate piece altogether, because there is indeed a different motivation behind the sudden surge of Jamaat violence.

We were presented a different picture of *hartal* on December 18. Called by the Left parties it was implemented by the government. The BRTC buses were not to be seen on the streets and neither were the ones owned by the pro-government owners and bus workers. And hardly ever have we seen the police preventing the public from coming on to the main roads because of "instruction from the top." And hardly have we seen picketers engaged in "musical blockade" of the road, with full support of the police. Contrast that to police actions on the other *hartals*. And the government has made a comic of itself by arresting the acting secretary general of the BNP for allegedly torching vehicles. He has another bomb blast case pending trial against him.

With the prospect of more *hartals* looming on the 2013 horizon, the outcomes have been made bleaker by the BNP threat of continuous *hartals* if its programmes were disrupted by the government, and the warning of countering the *hartals* on the streets by the AL. The matter has been compounded by injudicious and partisan handling of the issue by the AL.

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Sino-US ties need new approach

be viewed as relatively low priorities in the American domestic context but could prove supremely important in terms of great-power relations and the future of the US economy if they are mismanaged.

If Beijing and Washington, despite their many complementarities, fail to manage their real differences, the potential costs would be unimaginable. The trick will be to exploit the complementary aspects of Sino-American ties to resolve, contain or, if deterrence fails, defeat the threats that the differences may produce.

The Obama administration needs to decide how to position Sino-American ties. This will not be a binary process but one with many complicating factors, starting with

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the formulation of policies to revitalise the US economy. A confident and growing US will have few impediments to exercising its influence.

Restoring US competitiveness requires an end to talk and the implementation of a coherent strategy to make the American revival a reality. This will be enhanced if, as seems likely, China's skyrocketing growth trajectory encounters the transitional difficulties that other states which followed the Asian development model have met after the initial takeoff phase.

The agenda going forward has political, economic, and military dimensions. Politically, the newly re-elected American administration will be dealing with a new leadership in China. Early interactions between the two sides will assume outsized symbolism as indications of the directions in which new leaders may seek to proceed.

Finally, there is a huge surplus of

mistrust between the peoples, especially the militaries, of the US and China. Obama's cabinet would benefit from having at least one or two officials with hands-on experience in the Asia-Pacific region. Choices of commanders in the armed forces are complex, but adding qualifications of Asia work experience for certain positions is essential.

Sustaining and deepening military-to-military interaction can only help both camps demystify the other side and hopefully improve communications to reduce misunderstandings. From the US' perspective, China's greater military reach, especially at sea, but also in the air, space and cyber domains, will challenge the US military and its partners to

adjust doctrine and strategy.

Washington needs to quickly get past any talk about declaring China a currency manipulator. China's surplus was 10% of GDP in 2009. Today, that surplus has shrunk to a normal 2%. Currency is not the issue.

But there are plenty of trade issues to take up with China and other regional trade partners. American business is largely prospering in China, which is the US' second largest trade partner and fastest growing export destination. As the US seeks to restore economic dynamism at home, these facts must not be forgotten.

Moreover, China is at the beginning of what promises to be a massive campaign of outward investment that could benefit American workers. US administration representatives will be asked to review potential investments many times for their impact on national security. It is imperative that these

reviews are as transparent as possible and do not send the mistaken signal that no investment is welcome in the US. That implication would be incompatible with US national economic priorities, inconsistent with the American tradition of welcoming and benefiting from foreign direct investment, and could invoke reciprocal constraints on US investors.

US-China ties are too consequential to move along a deliberate path of confrontation. China and the US have shared interests in regional and international peace and prosperity and must find ways to cooperate and avoid unhealthy competition.

In the final presidential debate, Obama referred to China for the first time as an "adversary." But Xi Jinping, the new Party leader and head of the military, has promoted a novel concept, which he calls a "new kind of great-power relationship" that apparently means finding a way for a rising power and an existing power to avoid conflict. Obama should seek an early opportunity next year to deeply probe Xi's thinking to help make this a reality.

The first scheduled meeting between the two leaders will not occur until the G20 meets in 2013. Given the looming challenges between Beijing and Washington, Obama would do well to break with precedent and invite Xi for a long, unscripted weekend chat, say, in Hawaii early in their new terms, and both sides should welcome such an exploration of their mistrust and capacity for cooperation. An offer of this sort would be seen as a sign of the US president's strength, not weakness, and of respect for his Chinese counterpart, providing a constructive basis for managing the coming challenges.

The writers are Vice-President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Director, Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre for Global Policy, respectively. The article is an excerpt from their essay, *A New Great-Power Relationship with Beijing*.

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