

## Opposition leader's Wednesday speeches

*She has put across party stances on vital issues*

AT the outset, it is necessary to express a sense of relief at the passage of the elaborate programme of wayside rallies. That the massive mass contact did not cause any major traffic dislocation or an untoward incident means that it was on the whole well-managed. Kudos to the organizers. Even though it created inconvenience, even hardship to people, the programme, not being a hartal, went down well with the people. It has proved to be a good alternative to hartal and should be used as such.

The opposition leader has been most exhaustive with her comments on issues and persons as if releasing pent-up grievances against the government.

We are used to political rhetoric from our leaders but the opposition leader's comments on war crimes trial leave a clear impression of her siding with those accused in the trial. This is unfortunate on two counts: first, coming to terms with a deep scar in our national consciousness is being trifled with; and second, her obligations to the nation as an opposition leader in bringing justice to victims of crimes against humanity remain sadly unfulfilled.

Then her mixing up the war crimes trial with her vow to try Siraj Sikder's "killers" and make, in her own words, "war criminals" in Awami League face a trial characterises her negative attitude to trying the present set of accused of crimes against humanity. All this is a deliberate derogation of liberation war ethos which is not expected from a leader of her stature. Doubly unfortunate because there are freedom fighters within BNP and what is of great importance is her husband's call to arms at a crucial juncture in our liberation war.

On the caretaker issue, the dispute over party government versus non-party interim arrangement to hold election appears eminently solvable. The question boils down to 'a formula' on an interim government. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has floated a formula, the leader of the opposition should spell out her own demand in a concrete form. Something is already there to begin with and then to build up on through discussion at informal or formal levels to hammer out a mutually acceptable solution.

## Morsi after referendum

*He has a tightrope to walk*

DESPITE calls by President Morsi to "begin building our country's rebirth with free will...men, women, Muslims and Christians", Egypt's populace has never been so divided on the issue of freedom from authoritarian rule the fundamental pillar of the Egyptian spring that toppled the Mubarak regime. The referendum that was won by the Muslim brotherhood brought to light some interesting facts. According to the Egyptian election commission, while 60 percent of the people who voted backed the constitution. Of that figure, 36 percent of the total votes cast were against the new constitution. But the turnout was 30 percent.

Today, Egypt is a nation divided. The main opposition to the new constitution is based on the argument that the "Sharia" remains the main source of legislation. Although the new constitution has embedded in it rights of all religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and the dominant religion Islam to be protected by the State, fears abound that the document will be used to favour Islamists over that of other religious groups and adversely affect women's rights. What ought to be remembered is that a people that has experienced such major political upheaval in the immediate past a revolution that brought the country out of a decades old one-party rule will not take matters sitting down.

Allegations of fraud and a shaky Egyptian economy are not helping matters. The constitution is a 63-page document with some 236 articles covering every aspect from rights to religion. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that 40 percent of the population lacks literacy. There is also the urban-rural divide. While the Muslim Brotherhood commands great respect in the countryside, it is a different matter with the Alexandrians and residents of the capital city.

In the final analysis, Morsi has his work cut out. What ordinary Egyptians fear most of all is that the country does not slide back into autocracy. And the economy that has been in the red since the revolutionary days needs urgent reprieve. A tall order, a tightrope that must be carefully navigated by the President-elect if Egypt is to

### CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

high commissioner to Bangladesh has followed that dictum and called a spade a spade. He proclaimed on behalf of himself, his president and prime minister that India would never support the anti-liberation forces in Bangladesh. Forty-two years later a friend in need once again proved to be a friend indeed! Good to know that hasn't changed.

Some of our talk show titans absorbed the statement faster than a water-slurping sponge. They supported the Indian diplomat's remarks, and one of them explained that it was because India had lost 8,000 soldiers in the fight for Bangladesh. He meant to say India has its own goat in the memories of 1971, besides its love for Bangladesh.

Who killed those Indian soldiers is an open and shut case. They weren't killed by the freedom fighters or civilians of Bangladesh. Those soldiers were killed by enemy fire, namely the Pakistan army. Yet it was India which returned 93,000 soldiers to Pakistan without a scratch after their surrender. It didn't think of revenge, but abided by the international convention for prisoners of war.

When India talks about anti-

liberation forces in Bangladesh, one knows what that means. It means those who collaborated with the Pakistanis in 1971 and betrayed their countrymen. India supposedly hates them more or less as we do, perhaps for separate as well as common reasons.

Why does India appear to be fawning on Pakistan on the western front while fanning out hatred against it on the eastern front? Ever since 1971, India has made numerous attempts to woo Pakistan, not to say it was not the other way around. The world's longest love letter went from the children of India to the children of Pakistan in 2006. On February 19, 1999, the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee traveled to Lahore by bus that inaugurated the DelhiLahore bus service, officially known as Sada-e-Sarhad or Call of the Frontier. The service continued until the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament.

National interests have prompted the two neighbours to forge closer ties. The attacks on the Indian parliament and Mumbai brought interregnums to that history, but those undertows hardly prevented the surging tide of bilateral warmth. It's said that when India was building dams on Pakistani rivers in Kashmir in total

violation of the Indus Water Treaty, Pakistan looked the other way because it was part of a larger conspiracy for mutual interests. India has finally succeeded in selling electricity to Pakistan that is supposed to be generated through dams built on Pakistani waters.

There is always more than meets the eye. The two countries have made considerable headway underneath their hostile cover. They have agreed

to allow two banks each to operate across the border. According to Indian Commerce Minister Anand Sharma, his country is keen to open more routes with Pakistan to boost

bilateral trade.

Last September India and Pakistan signed an agreement in Islamabad to liberalise the visa regime aimed at easing travel by their citizens. Indian daily *The Hindu* reports that the governments of two countries are in talks to resume roaming service for their mobile users banned in 2004. Pakistani farmers have recently opposed their government's move to formalise "the most favoured nation" status for Indian farm goods.

The craze of Pakistani people for Indian movies and music is a foregone conclusion. Many Pakistani actors, singers and musicians are now heading for Mumbai to seek career

enhancement. The most striking revelation is that despite so much apparent enmity between the two countries, one hardly hears about BSF killing Pakistani intruders.

Perhaps India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have relations that run like a triangular love affair. If Bangladesh has a feeling for India, India has it for Pakistan. So when our politicians are courting Indian attention, the Indian politicians are courting Pakistan. American singer Jill Sobule sings that love is never equal because someone always loves more than the other.

Despite Pakistan's suspected involvement in the attack on Indian parliament and Mumbai, and despite Pakistan's obvious support to the secessionist forces in Kashmir, India shows more interest in that country than it shows in Bangladesh. Water disputes, trade imbalance and border killing remain ignored while India selfishly pushes transit through this land.

India treats Pakistan with kid gloves, because it has a nuclear bomb and is a breeding ground for terrorism. But is it cheating Bangladesh in love? The goodwill created in 1971 cannot guarantee future streams of returns forever.

It's not enough that India vows not to support the anti-liberation forces, unless it can also show that it has respect for our independence. What we have seen so far is that India is getting the best of both worlds.

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### | The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

# Ancient Buddhas, modern peril

ANDREW LAWLER

WHEN the Taliban blasted the famous Bamiyan Buddhas with artillery and dynamite in March 2001, leaders of many faiths and countries denounced the destruction as an act of cultural terrorism. But today, with the encouragement of the US government, Chinese engineers are preparing a similar act of desecration in Afghanistan: the demolition of a vast complex of richly decorated ancient Buddhist monasteries.

The offense of this Afghan monument is not idolatry. Its sin is to sit atop one of the world's largest copper deposits.

The copper at the Mes Aynak mine, just an hour's drive south of Kabul, is to be extracted under a roughly \$3 billion deal signed in 2007 between Afghanistan and China's Metallurgical Group Corp. The Afghan Finance Minister, Omar Zakhilwal, recently said the project could pump \$300 million a year into government coffers by 2016. But the project has been plagued by rumours of corruption; there was widespread talk of a \$30 million kickback involving the former minister of mines, who resigned.

In 2009, archaeologists were given a three-year deadline to salvage what they could at Mes Aynak, but raising money, securing equipment and finding experienced excavators took up more than half of that time. So the focus now is solely on rescuing objects. An international team of archaeologists is scrambling to save what it can before the end of this month, when it must vacate the central mining zone, at the heart of the Buddhist complex.

The task is herculean: More than 1,000 statues have been identified, along with innumerable wall paintings, fragile texts and rare wooden ornamentation. And the excavators can only guess at what may lie in older layers. There is no time to dig deeper.

From about the third century until the ninth century, Afghanistan served as a bridge between India and China and played a key role in shaping the Buddhism that swept across Central Asia. At Mes Aynak, monks and artisans built an astonishing array of temples, courtyards and stupas, as well as whole towns of workshops and

homes for miners. (Even then, Mes Aynak was exploited for its copper.)

Afghanistan was home to an extraordinary mix of Nestorian Christians, Persian Zoroastrians, Hindus, Jews and, eventually, Muslims. New scholarship based on finds at ancient sites like Mes Aynak suggests that Islam arrived here not with sudden fire and sword, but as a slowly rising tide. This was an Afghanistan of cosmopolitan wealth and industry, and of religious innovation, devotion and tolerance, at a time when Europe was mired in the Dark Ages.

Many statues and paintings will be saved for museum exhibitions, but the potential for understanding a key

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piece of Afghan history -- and for drawing future tourists -- will soon be lost. Deborah Klimburg-Salter, a scholar of art and archaeology who recently visited the site, told me that Mes Aynak "would be of great historical value not only for the history of Afghanistan but the whole region -- if they could slow down, excavate and document properly."

It's ironic: A company based in China, which received Buddhism via Afghanistan, will destroy a key locus of that transmission. Washington, which condemned the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, is standing by as Kabul sacrifices its cultural heritage for short-term revenue.

The destruction is not just a cultural travesty. It may not even result in the advertised economic benefits for some time to come. World Bank experts told me that large-scale mining is not likely to take place at Mes

Aynak for years. For one thing, there is no smelter to process the ore and no railroad to carry the material to China. An August rocket attack by Taliban militants on the mining camp prompted the Chinese workers to evacuate the heavily guarded site. The tenacious archaeologists, mostly Afghans, stayed behind.

There is still hope that the Afghan government might allow archaeologists to remain at the central complex past Dec. 31. "We're hoping we get more time," Philippe Marquis, the director of the French archaeological mission in Afghanistan and a lead scientist on the project, told me. There is no reason archaeology and



mining operations can't coexist at the site. But archaeologists fear the government wants to close the site to researchers and reporters to avoid embarrassing images of dynamited monasteries.

The looming deadline is not Marquis' only worry. New Taliban attacks might prompt the Chinese to abandon the site and stop paying for the security forces that protect the area. That could invite looting by desperately poor Afghans. An ancient Buddhist statue can sell for tens of thousands of dollars in the dark, unregulated corners of the international art market.

Last month, Buddhist protesters marched in Bangkok, denouncing the planned demolition of Mes Aynak. An American filmmaker has raised \$35,200 on Kickstarter to document the controversy. Afghanistan's ambas-

sador to Pakistan recently said it was "the duty of all" Afghans to preserve what remains of the country's Buddhist heritage.

But there are few scholars with the political pull to bring the matter into the international spotlight, and the United Nations has all but ignored the matter. A Unesco official told me he hoped that "some accommodation could be made for the parallel activities of archaeology and mining," but the organisation hasn't held the government and company accountable.

The looming devastation at Mes Aynak is but the latest example of threats to cultural treasures. Recently, the Egyptian Islamist leader Murgan

Salem al-Gohary caused an international stir when he mused that the Sphinx and the pyramids at Giza should be flattened. And this summer, Islamist rebels smashed Sufi tombs in Timbuktu, Mali, an act some have called a war crime.

Whether for economic gain or ideological purity, destroying humanity's common heritage limits our understanding of one another, as well as of our past -- something we can ill afford in today's fractious world. "We are only breaking stones," the Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar said dismissively in 2001, when he heard the international outcry over the statues' destruction. Even given Afghanistan's dire financial plight, it's not a position to accept, much less emulate.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 28

1885

Indian National Congress a political party of India is founded in Bombay, British India.

2008

War in Somalia: The militaries of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government and Ethiopian troops capture Mogadishu unopposed.

2010

Arab Spring: Popular protests begin in Algeria against the government.