

STRAIGHT LINE

Water transport workers' strike called off

Passengers' plight at an end

BANGLADESH Nourjan Sramik Federation (BNSF), the apex platform of six organisations representing inland water transport workers has been enforcing a nationwide strike since January 09 to press home their demands for better pay. So, for the last few days, passengers have been bereft of launch services throughout the country. It is astonishing to note that the authorities have taken so long to bring the various parties including launch owners and the BNSF to the negotiating table.

When we learn that two concerned ministries, i.e. shipping on the one side and labour and employment on the other have been trading letters to one another to take the initiative, we are at a loss. Granted workers have a legitimate claim to higher wages. Again launch owners may have reservations about the magnitude of increase in wages being demanded. At the end of the day it is the responsibility of authorities to tackle these contending issues by bringing the parties involved to the negotiating table to thrash out a workable solution. Approximately 55 launches leave Dhaka for the south-western districts on 36 routes carrying thousands of passengers on a daily basis. Thanks to the strike, this number has dwindled down to about 10 as of January 10. This situation has left thousands of would-be passengers in dire straits in the middle of one of the coldest winters in 40 years of recorded history.

We are happy to note that that transport workers have withdrawn their indefinite strike after receiving assurance of a wage hike of 20%. The deal overseen by the shipping ministry and BIWTA authorities could have been struck earlier had there been better coordination at government level. What ought to be noted that wages was one of several demands of transport workers. Many other issues that remain unaddressed include security on waterways, maintaining navigability on rivers, proper fitness of vessels. Unless BIWTA addresses these areas of concern, there remains the possibility of future strikes something not worth looking forward to either from the perspective of passengers or those who have made the inland maritime sector their profession or business.

Plantation workers find a new opportunity

We welcome sending them to Malaysia

WE are heartened to recall that recently Malaysia has made a formal request to our government to recruit 10,000 male workers from Bangladesh. This marks the official lifting of the four-year ban on the part of Malaysia to take in our workers. It's a doubly happy news from Malaysia which has been a very important destination for export of manpower for us.

An elaborate plan has been chalked out for registration of the jobseekers online through the help of 4,500 union parishad information and service centres. Jobseekers under some 500 UPs which are not equipped to handle the registration work would be free to avail of the opportunity in the neighbouring information centres.

A database of 35,000 would be prepared from which 11,500 names would be selected through lottery in the first phase of recruitment. The schedules have been drawn up for all the components of the process including for their training in 14 government technical training centres across the country. According to latest information, the first batch of new recruits is likely to fly out after February.

The two other good features are as follows: First, this constitutes the first phase of what promises to be 40,000 of our plantation workers eventually making it to Malaysia. Secondly, Tk 40,000 is going to be total cost for each farmer to take up their positions in Malaysia.

The plan good on paper but it must be implemented with due care taken of quality assurance in terms of selection procedures. Upon their success and conduct depends the continuation of manpower supply to a very friendly and resourceful country like Malaysia.

We understand that selection of workers from each union will be based on quota system which in turn will follow a demographic map. Our plea is that the distribution of jobs is consistent with the principles of fair play including the con-

Caretaker government and institutional resilience



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

IN recent times there have been encouraging and laudatory pronouncements on the socio-economic achievements of Bangladesh.

Positive comments testifying to our economic resilience have come from Nobel winning economist, internationally credible media and reputed think-tanks.

While these reactions may cause justifiable pride, there are, however, concerns about our inability to affect acceptable and peaceful modality of holding national elections with a view to transferring political power.

Additionally, there are doubts about the integrity of our governance apparatus and its impact on public good.

Experts are at a stance that the staying power of democracy varies from country to country. There is a view that the timing of political breakdown depends upon the strength of political institutions; and that collapse may not take overtake a country marked by economic failure where the political institutions have acquired durability through age and tradition.

The question is: Are there dangers in a society characterised by fragile institutions and a constitution which is looked upon by politicians as so pliant that it can be bent to any whim or caprice of the ruling class? This premonition arises in view of the potential stalemate over the issue of revival or otherwise of the neutral and non-partisan caretaker government, constitutionally incorporated but subsequently struck off, to oversee the general election.

Coming to specifics, is there much

substance in the complaint that the caretaker government concept in Bangladesh would not have been necessary if the concerned State institutions acted firmly at the given time; when demands were made to ensure fair election?

To recollect, that brings us to the now-infamous Magura bye-election to the parliamentary seat in 1994. There were allegations of large-scale governmental interference in the run up to that election.

From the reports appearing in the media at that time it was abundantly

and "so long as he does not act arbitrarily, or do anything that is prohibited by law his actions are immune from challenge."

A cardinal point highlighted in support of the movement for revival of caretaker government is the alleged partiality of public servants towards the incumbent political government, if election is held under such government. The question is if and why public servants have become so pliant that they stand ever ready to execute irregular and illegal orders of their political bosses in clear violation of

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clear that the Magura election had become a political caricature. An upright Chief Election Commissioner could have declared postponement and called the contesting parties to behave. The law enforcing agencies including the Armed Forces could have been mobilised to ensure fair election. However, the then CEC, a member of the higher judiciary showed no signs of firmness leading others to call "it timidity, some indecisiveness and yet others termed this as a misplaced legal formalism."

The CEC was physically present on the spot in Magura and thus he did not need any report to assess the seriousness of the situation that demanded drastic action. It is only proper to say that the CEC is mandated by the Constitution to supervise and conduct the elections.

Legal experts are of the view that the CEC "has all the powers even beyond law to do all that is necessary in the ends of free and fair election"

their constitutional obligations and functions.

If we retrace our steps then we will find that the concept of an independent body to recruit public servants free from political influence, to the extent possible, got firmly rooted in the constitution in the Indian sub-continent; later adopted by Pakistan.

At independence, we had a model to follow, quite clearly signifying that there are some elements in the principles of governance in a democratic country which are more or less immutable over time and space. Using the term colonial, as is done by many enthusiastic politicians and academics, in a pejorative sense, does not actually serve any useful purpose.

In Bangladesh, unfortunately, the issue of merit-based selection process in the civil service did not warrant adequate attention in the political establishment. It lost its homogenous character quite early which is so vital for the morale of the service and the

element of the *esprit de corps* that are necessary to maintain adequate working relationship and environment.

Successive political governments have shown utter indifference to civil service reform measures. There are apprehensions that the lurking distrust on the part of political leadership may have prompted them not to have a merit-based administrative system.

In fact, the political government and the public service commission have never stood up to ensure quality of recruitment of civil service.

Between 1982 and 1992 the quality was compromised in the name of meeting urgent situations. We have not realised that it is not in the interests of a strong and mature political government to create and sustain a pliant and cringing bureaucracy thereby crippling the State institutions.

No wonder we find ourselves mired in a situation wherein we cannot trust our public servants to act fairly and neutrally under a political government. Quite clearly to our peril the nurturing of service ethos has not been allowed.

While the caretaker government system is undeniably an unfortunate indictment of the unreliability of the political class, the fact remains that the arrangement drew the supreme judiciary into politics. In such an arrangement the role of political chief executive of the Republic contained the danger of distorting the constitutional scheme in which the Supreme Court exists and exercises its power and jurisdiction.

The need, therefore, is to foster and cherish the professional growth and sustenance of the institutions of the Republic to ensure harmonious political succession.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star

RAJINDER PURI

FOR how long will India continue to waste time while dealing with Pakistan?

The stalemate between both nations has spanned six decades. India's progress on all fronts is impeded because of this albatross hung around the nation's neck.

The recent movement forward in peace talks has been derailed yet again by an incident on the border. Pakistani troops crossed the ceasefire line to kill and mutilate two Indian soldiers. Pakistan disputes this version. Regardless, the fact remains that the border incident has set back the peace process. This writer has consistently argued about the futility of proceeding with the peace dialogue through small confidence-building steps. The powerful vested interests against Indo-Pakistan peace can always halt the process through an engineered event. This has happened before. It has happened again.

Questions are being raised whether India should at all continue with the peace talks. The dichotomy between Pakistan's recent professions of peace and its army's actions on the ground has provoked allegations of double-speak. One does not know if such dichotomy indicates doublespeak or the army's division.

One does not know whether General Kayani's writ runs unchallenged over the Pakistan army or whether there are elements following their own agenda. This question has become irrelevant. Despite the sympathy one may summon for the sane and friendly elements inside Pakistan it is no longer possible to ignore the damage being inflicted on this nation. Pakistan must deliver. Failing that India must adequately respond.

It is New Delhi's failure to formulate a proper response that makes this nation truly pathetic. The question that needs to be asked is not whether a dialogue with Pakistan is desirable. What should be questioned is the content of the dialogue. In dialogue, India does not know what to say. In

diplomacy, India does not know what to do. This is happening because India does not know what it wants. Only a clear conception of the end goal can help determine the formulation of strategy whether through a soft or a hard approach.

This writer for over a decade has been stressing that there are two options for India, one hard and the other soft. The goal to be realised remains the same in the pursuit of either option. That goal is to reclaim the cultural nationalism of the region that allows its two peoples to live in peace and harmony with free movement between them. The soft option would result in the creation of a South-Asian Union having joint defence and common market between both nations.

The establishment of such a Union would in the natural course greatly facilitate a mutually agreed solution to the Kashmir dispute. The hard option would result in initiating diplomatic moves that could prove fatal for Pakistan. That in turn would lead to restructuring of the subcontinent. Pakistanis might recall the widely circulated Middle East map prepared by Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Peters in the Armed Forces Journal in June 2006 showing a Balkanized Pakistan. Peters is a retired colonel of the US National War Academy.

To explore the feasibility of the soft option, New Delhi must bluntly ask Pakistan if it is prepared in principle to enter into a joint defence treaty with India as was proposed by President Ayub Khan in 1959. The time-frame and the phases to achieve this may be open to negotiation.

If the Pakistan army can openly

state that it is committed to accepting this arrangement that will be sufficient assurance of conducting meaningful peace talks with Islamabad. That will be sufficient proof that Pakistan's army is no longer the cat's-paw of the Chinese army and is capable of taking an independent decision. If the Pakistan army cannot publicly commit itself to achieving this goal, it is futile to proceed with the peace dialogue. Talks with Islamabad will then hold no tangible future for India. New Delhi then must

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take a good hard look at the Pakistan army's continuing role across the border and opt for the hard option against Islamabad.

The hard option will consist of breaking all cultural and trade ties with Pakistan, cut our diplomatic contacts to the barest minimum, and reduce our embassy in Islamabad to virtually an empty building. The option of breaking diplomatic relations altogether may not be ruled out.

Pakistan should be left free to lean heavily on China.

China may be left free

to prop up a crumbling Pakistan. Meanwhile, India should respect the wishes of the people of Baluchistan who have sought independence ever since the Khan of Kalat demanded it from Mohammed Ali Jinnah in 1947. India need offer no material or financial support to Baluchistan. Publicly declared moral support will suffice.

There are enough elements in the rest of the world to aid Baluch freedom fighters.

Next, India should oppose the US and recognise Afghan claims on the Durand Line Treaty which lapsed in 1993, by which much of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province would revert to Afghanistan and thereby unite the Pashtun tribes across the

present Afghan-Pakistan border.

All Afghans ranging from President, Hamid Karzai to the Taliban are united on this issue. The Tajiks and Uzbeks of Northern Afghanistan would also welcome this move which by compensating Pashtun appetite in the South would loosen Pashtun hold in the North to allow autonomy for their region in a new federal arrangement.

The former Foreign Minister from the North, Abdullah Abdullah, is a strong votary of a federal united Afghanistan with a separate autonomous province in the North. Former US ambassador and strategic analyst Robert Blackwill has already proposed such division of Afghanistan into separate provinces.

If India were to pursue the hard option what would it lose? It would merely have to secure its borders firmly against a potential Sino-Pak axis, which it has had to do for years now. With such a break between India and Pakistan, China would have its hands full to keep Pakistan united. More significantly, it would be driven to choose between Pakistan and India, which provides a substantial export market to Beijing. How will Beijing tilt? It is nobody's case that the hard option is desirable.

It is a last resort if Pakistan cannot be brought to the peace table with sincerity of intent. I believe that such a contingency need not arise. I believe that if India were to confront Islamabad with the choice between joint defence and the hard option, Islamabad would cooperate.

The fault up till now lies with New Delhi which has failed to articulate its demands to Islamabad with clarity. Islamabad in the days of Musharraf did propose a peace formula to which New Delhi's response was inadequate. It is time now for India to get pro-active with peace proposals. It is time to make or break the peace dialogue. That in turn would lead to restructuring of the subcontinent.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 12

475 Basiliscus becomes Byzantine Emperor, with a coronation ceremony in the Hebdomon palace in Constantinople.

1971 British minister's home bombed. Two bombs explode at the Hertfordshire home of Employment Secretary Robert Carr causing serious damage.

1976 Crime writer Agatha Christie dies. The most popular novelist in the world, Dame Agatha Christie, dies leaving a rumoured multi-million pound fortune and a final book waiting to be published.

1976 The UN Security Council votes 11-1 to allow the Palestine Liberation Organisation to participate in a Security Council debate (without voting rights).

1991 Gulf War: An act of the US Congress authorises the use of military force to drive Iraq out of Kuwait.

2006 A stampede during the Stoning the Devil ritual on the last day at the Hajj in Mina, Saudi Arabia, kills at least 362 Muslim pilgrims.