

## SUNDAY POUCH

# Some inconvenient truths!

## Opposition leader's remarks

*We expect her to play a judicious role at this juncture*

**H**OLDING a press conference on Friday against the backdrop of Jamaat-e-Islami-called two-day hartal, Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia has added another day to the series of shutdowns. As a result, the entire nation will be in the throes of another 60 hours of uncertainties and chaos. Even on hartal eve there have been disturbances.

Given the stressful condition that the country is in, the three-day period will predictably be marked with more violence, loss of human lives and destruction of public and private properties. What is of graver concern is that as part of the spiralling violence over the last few days, sporadic attacks on minority communities have also been reported.

We have always been opposed to hartal as it is usually forced upon the people, who have had enough of it. Already the shutdowns enforced between February and early March have wreaked unimaginable havoc on the country's economy.

Therefore, we would urge both the opposition BNP and Jamaat to step back from the path of confrontation.

It is disconcerting to note that the opposition leader has drawn an analogy between the loss of lives in the aftermath of the last two verdicts of the International War crimes Tribunal (ICT) and the genocide by occupation army in 1971. Such equation sounds absurd. Her statement may be construed as making light of the genocide of 1971. It is worthwhile to mention that in the war of liberation, many BNP leaders had made significant contribution.

The Jatiya Sangsad session is on. Hopefully, it will address some of the contentious issues of the time including present level of violence and divisiveness across the political spectrum. In that context, we urge the BNP to join parliament session to play its due role and contribute positively towards bringing peace and order in the country.

The nation is divided and the political forces are highly polarised. Thus, judicious approach to handling the situation is urgently called for from both sides.

## Act against unlicensed diagnostic centres

*They are a threat to public health*

**T**HE news that unlicensed diagnostic centres and private hospitals have been operating in Chittagong and, by extension, in the capital and other regions of the country does not surprise anyone. What does come as a surprise, though, is that the authorities have so far proved unable to cope with the problem, with the result that such centres and hospitals have been operating with impunity. What is true of the more than 1,000 diagnostic centres and private hospitals in Chittagong is also true of other such unauthorised institutions in the country. In almost every instance, these centres and hospitals begin functioning without waiting for their applications for licences to be approved by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). That is a clear violation of the law, criminal in nature, and clearly calls for action. It helps little that mobile courts go around twice a month, fine centres they find guilty of such transgressions and come away. These centres, having paid the fines, go back to work as if nothing has happened.

There is little question that these centres and hospitals, not just in Chittagong but elsewhere as well, are simply money spinning machines for organized groups of unscrupulous people. In very many instances, untrained and unskilled people instead of qualified medical practitioners are found manning these institutions. That not only violates ethics but is also a grave danger to public health, especially of unsuspecting and innocent citizens who have no way of finding out the nature of the working of these organized gangs. So the facts are all out there. Besides, there have been occasions when these centres and hospitals have offered wrong diagnoses to patients, with predictably horrific results. What now is required is for the authorities to take severe, sustained action against these so-called diagnostic centres and private hospitals and put them out of action.

Action is also required elsewhere. The DGHS must be taken to task for looking the other way despite knowing how openly these centres work without waiting for their licences to be granted or approved. Public health is a crucial factor in socio-economic life. Letting it fall prey to the predatory



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

**T**HESE are indeed awkward times for Bangladesh. The common man is bewildered about the turn of events. First

there was the raging debate about caretaker government or an all party interim government between the Awami League and the opposition BNP. A series of *hartals* and rallies and protests and counter protests punctuated his daily life. He persevered and waited for good sense to prevail on both sides; for things to resolve themselves. But this is yet to happen.

Just as things got worse, another and more vicious cycle of controversy and violence took over. This time it is around the issue of trial of persons indicted for crimes against humanity during the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971.

As part of the election pledge by the ruling AL, the government constituted an International War Crimes Tribunal and at the first stage incarcerated seven prominent individuals belonging to two political parties, the Jamaat-e-Islam and the BNP to face charges. After several legal and procedural hiccups the Tribunal finally got down to hearings in two Courts. So far three persons accused of the crimes have been tried and verdicts passed. The first person was tried in absentia and given a death sentence.

The second individual was given a life sentence. It was this sentence that raised eye-brows among a section of the youth. They felt aggrieved and expressed their resentment by mobilising their adherents through the social media to gather over the last twenty seven days or more in Shahbagh square in Dhaka and raise slogans against the verdict.

This gathering caught the imagination of millions within the country as it also revived the spirit that inspired people in 1971 to fight the War of Independence.

It is the latest verdict, on the third

accused; it has caused consternation among a couple of political parties. A death sentence has been passed on him. But he belongs to the Jamaat-e-Islami party. This sentence has brought out a number of young people belonging to the student wing of the Jamaat who have turned violent and in protest are announcing political programmes.

So today we have in the country two viewpoints that are claiming our attention. One, which is imbued with the spirit of our Independence and seeking justice for crimes committed by some in 1971 and the other is the one reacting to the court verdicts that have passed sentence on those who violated the 1971 spirit.

Last Friday, the main opposition BNP spoke about the prevailing situation and expressed the view that the trials underway in the Tribunal are not of the high standards desired. Its verdicts are deemed controversial. It lent its support to the political programme laid out by the Jamaat-e-Islami to protest holding the trials.

There is no doubt that the people at large are quite fed up with *hartals* (work stoppages) and the violence in the streets. They are apprehensive about the future. Businesses are seriously worried. The image of the country abroad is also of great importance. Bangladeshis are increasingly being connected to the world. They cannot afford an international perception that tells that the country is ill-managed and is mired in political troubles.

It is in this context that we need to tell some inconvenient truths. We hope those who think about the good future of the country may listen.

At the outset, it is important that in the International Crimes Tribunal the prosecution team must be able to present water tight case against each accused. Unless that is ensured, there will always be questions about a possible miscarriage of justice. The prosecution should be able to come up with credible witnesses who can face tough cross examination.

The crimes are alleged to have been committed more than 40 years back. Evidence and eye witnesses

could have been tampered with or are long dead and gone. The prosecution should be given enough time to collect evidence and present them in a transparent manner.

There is no need to rush things. Of course we hear of prosecution witnesses being threatened and even disappearing. The government should consider a programme of safe houses for such witnesses so that they remain safe till they appear in the trial. No political consideration should be allowed to rush the trials. It will not serve the public interest in the long-run.

Second, the Jamaat is still a registered political party. The activities of its members should not in any way shame the party. Of course it is difficult to blame the party for actions which it sympathisers may do. But when it comes to burning the national flag or desecrating the Shahid Minars, the party must look into these seriously. If the party is still not ready to reconcile to what the majority of the people want, it may lose whatever support it has already. TV footages should help to identify those who were out to ram-page, hurt innocent bystanders and damage public and private property and dishonour the flag.

The law enforcing agencies have their own duties to perform. They cannot allow any damage to public and private properties. They also cannot allow physical attack on anyone, even if it is a bystander or an activist belonging to any political party.

However the law enforcers at all times must exercise restraint and at the first opportunity apprehend the trouble-makers and book them under the law. Law enforcers must not use lethal weapons as it may unnecessarily invite more trouble. But in their self-defence they must go by their books. The government must take firm steps to control unruly elements, who incidentally

**People are fed up with hartals. Law enforcers should protect common people's rights and possessions; they should not use lethal weapons as it may unnecessarily invite more trouble. The government should take firm steps to control any unruly elements.**

could be paid agents with a separate agenda.

It must be remembered that both the government and the main opposition have to contest the next elections. The electorate is watching closely and are collecting impressions on how the various political parties behaved to keep things calm.

The youth in Shahbagh are playing an important role to keeping up the spirit of Bangladesh independence. No political or political group should try to interfere and impose their agenda on them. Let the youth urge, appeal and cajole in the name of Bangladesh to have fair trials and sound verdicts. They have every right to do so. Why should roving bands of criminal elements try to disrupt their gatherings?

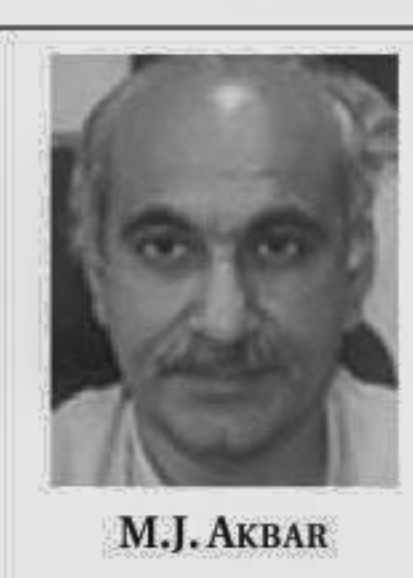
But the youth must not in any way give the impression that they call the shots in the country. Let them not forget that there is a democratically-elected government in place and any action it takes must be answerable in parliament and in the courts of law. The government is therefore accountable to constitutional bodies. The youth must continue to show respect to the institutions of state in the pursuit of their goals.

In the life of a nation, there are moving times when history and realities clash. It is then the job of leaders, especially political leaders, to show the way forward. Any action that divides a nation however right, the causes should be abandoned in favour of action that can unite its citizens. This is what posterity will claim and which our present leadership must deliver.

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## BYLINE

# Men are the weaker sex



M.J. AKBAR

**T**HE one certain fact about this uncertain business called "advertising" is that "you can't do without it."

Such compulsion does not mean this hit-and-run affair necessarily works. It is difficult to predict when a campaign will be a hit, and when the agency has merely run away to lubricate its salary sheet.

The worst spiel in recent times was surely the advertising of a brief, and eminently forgettable, India-Pakistan cricket encounter last December. The agency was not promoting sport between traditional antagonists; it was announcing the consequences of an existentialist war with all the finesse of the massacre-friendly Nadir Shah on a Delhi weekend in 1739. Conversely, the best campaign I have seen in a long while has been the television advertisements which raised the curtain on the women's cricket tournament: wry, tongue very much in cheek, and emasculating men with a pleasing insouciance.

There is no mystery about why. Women's cricket went well because the agency believed in it. It represents something far more than fund raising for an already bloated game.

Women's cricket has been around for a long while, scratching at the turnstiles, seeking attention and the legitimacy of public sup-

port. At long last, it is an idea's whose time has come. It now represents the third great revolution in a sport that has long been a mirror of social mores.

The first liberation came when "professionals" in Britain won equal terms with "amateurs." Professional is a term that carries so much pride now that we quite forget that once it was synonymous with something as "grubby" as earning money for talent in sports. It took a world war, the second of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to destroy the stupid pretensions of aristocrats who forced their working class "professionals" to use a separate entrance

**Women were once taunted by men as the weaker sex because they could not compete with the brutal violence of males. In truth, women have a much tougher body, stronger mind and spirit for childbirth. Whereas, men simply have more powerful muscles.**

to a cricket field. The nobles wore silk scarves and gloried in the vanity that they were, literally, a class apart because they did not have to actually do anything for a living. They were lords of the manor, and hence lords of the field. Today, mercifully, merit rules. Commerce bows only before success, and success is not a genetic entitlement.

The second revolution matured in India and Pakistan, when merit took cricket away from the confines of the middle-class, and into the small towns or city bylines, where a new India-and-Pakistan was being incubated. The urban middle-class

shares at least one trait with the white or brown aristocracy; it has many alternative routes to achievement. Cricket was a pleasure, even when exacting, but it was not quite a hunger. The gnawing desperation to beat the odds of life through excellence in a game whose financial value exploded beyond the dreams of avarice created a new base for triumphant upward mobility. If any astrologer had told 10-year-old M.S. Dhoni's parents that he would one day become as wealthy as he is now, they would have given him a nice cup of tea and then told him to go tease someone else. It is the same with many

ished women through the ages in segregation, and then attached a false morality to their subjugation. Sport is freedom from segregation. We might not notice this in India, where trousers and jeans have become the preferred wear of women. But, the fact that Pakistan's women wear trousers when they go to bat and field will be a huge spur to a society that is still controlled too often by men who have not left the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There was a time, during the regime of General Zia ul Huq, when some Pakistani fundamentalists wanted television coverage of cricket banned because women at home would be able to see the alluring Imran Khan rub a red cricket ball down the front of his trousers, and therefore near his crotch. It has been a long journey since then. We should celebrate this journey. Cricket will do a hundred times more for gender equality in Pakistan than a thousand speeches by well-meaning liberals.

There are countries which do not send women to the Olympics for moral reasons; or more accurately, because they believe that the sight of women will encourage immorality. I cannot imagine anything more stupid. To display one's face and ability is not nudity, neither among men nor women. Why shouldn't women be allowed to behave as normally as men?

One thing is clear. It is men who are the weaker sex.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 3

**1575** Indian Mughal Emperor Akbar defeats Bengali army at the Battle of Tukaroi.

**1820** The US Congress passes the Missouri Compromise.

**1898** Emil Artin, German mathematician (d. 1962) was born.

**1915** NACA, the predecessor of NASA, is founded.

**1923** *TIME* magazine is published for the first time.

**1940** Owen Spencer-Thomas, English broadcaster, journalist and clergyman is born.

**2005** Steve Fossett becomes the first person to fly an airplane non-stop around the world solo without refueling.