

Hartals lead to a severe supply crunch

Consumers take the brunt without let-up

ALREADY three consecutive dawn-to-dusk hartals enforced by Jamaat-Shibir had hurt the supply chain of the economy. As if that was not enough of a disruption in the market, a three-day 60-hour continual countrywide shutdown has got underway with the BNP adding one day to the 48-hour day-night strike announced by the Jamaat-Shibir combine. It is worthwhile to note that the principal opposition BNP lent moral support to Jamaat called hartals. In other words, with the BNP joining in, the overall hartal situation looks fraught with risks of violence, hardship for the people.

As a matter of fact, many goods-laden trucks have been stranded in various parts of the country hindering movement of goods to the wholesale and retail networks. Many lorry-owners are refusing to put their vehicles on hire and those who are agreeable to leasing out vehicles are charging exorbitant rates. It is the consumers who will have to bear the brunt of prices being marked up by the traders on the plea of higher cost of business.

Vegetable prices have shot up and so have those of other perishable items because in the stuck-up trucks, these are susceptible to rotting. In fact, a wide range of essentials including rice are beginning to be expensive. It is easily imaginable how lower productivity coupled with dislocation of supplies during the remainder of the hartal period is going to affect the markets with its deleterious effects on the consumers' plight.

Little wonder, heads of 27 trade bodies have voiced their concern over the spiralling violence in national politics. The business community has urged the opposition parties to refrain from frequent shutdowns. Such continuous strikes can only spell lawlessness and anarchy. Severe deterioration of law and order does not only breed social insecurity but also reflects on political instability. This in turn can reduce investment in the economy.

Our earnest hope is that the political parties would disengage from the confrontational mode and take the path of discussion in the greater interest of our beloved country.

Violence against minority community

Nip it in the bud

WE note with a great deal of concern that the recent eruptions of political violence have been marked by some attacks on members of Hindu community with their houses and temples vandalised. Reports of such incidents have come from different areas of Noakhali, Chittagong, Barisal, Bagerhat and Gazipur.

That this is very unfortunate as well as outrageous is saying the least. We condemn the perpetrators of such cowardly and despicable acts in the strongest term. The government must deal with the situation firmly to nip the sinister trend in the bud.

Since the members of minority community are vulnerable to the machinations of trouble-mongers, necessary precautionary measures should have been put in place earlier on to pre-empt any untoward incident.

At first, reports of violence on the community came from Begumganj in Noakhali after the verdict on Delwar Hossain Sayedee came out on Thursday; then a pattern set in.

The government must fill in the gaps in its security arrangements as it cannot afford to be caught unprepared in the future. We urge the government to ensure reinforced police presence, especially in places that are inhabited by the people of minority community.

As a society having homogenous ethnic texture, communal harmony has traditionally been Bangladesh's hallmark. Throughout the ages people of different religious faiths have been coexisting peacefully in these parts.

So, the violence that has happened might have been a ploy of the vested quarters to smear the secular image of the country.

The government should now stand by the victims, maintain constant vigil by law-enforcers as well as by local people to thwart any further attempt to attack them or cause communal disharmony.

Every specific instance of vandalism against the minority community, their houses and religious places must be probed to identify the culprits and take measures to bring them to justice. At the same time, the victims need to be

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 4

1789

In New York City, the first Congress of the United States meets, putting the United States Constitution into effect.

1991

Sheikh Saad Al-Abdallah Al-Salim Al-Sabah, the Prime Minister of Kuwait, returns to his country for the first time since Iraq's invasion.

2002

Afghanistan: Seven American Special Operations Forces soldiers are killed as they attempt to infiltrate the Shahi Kot Valley on a low-flying helicopter reconnaissance mission.

2009

The International Criminal Court (ICC) issues an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur. Al-Bashir is the first sitting head of state to be indicted by the ICC since its establishment in 2002.

Drawing a line in the sand?

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

I write in deep anguish, in deep resentment, and somewhat in despair over the recent happenings. They were blatant, in your face insults to our nationhood, to the core values of our struggle for independence. On the surface these affronts were a reaction of a bigoted minority to the historic upsurge of national ire against war criminals, and justice demanded by our youths against the criminals that was voiced over three weeks in Shahbagh Square. But deep down this is a resurgence and muscle flexing by elements that have inherited the spirit and philosophy of the forces that stood against us, and aided and collaborated with the power that had launched a war against us in 1971.

In 1971 when the Pakistan army was in a full-scale war against the civilians of Bangladesh, a cadre of people from among us formed bodies to aid the marauding army in its murderous tasks across the country. Their motivation was religion, and not ethnicity, language or culture that defined us a Bengali nation. In the name of religion this cadre perpetrated heinous crimes against their own people, and they rationalised their acts against humanity in that name.

As a sub-divisional officer in a district of Dhaka during that period, I had painfully witnessed how a leader of that cadre would obey the dictates of a Pakistani army commander who was the local martial law administrator. The leader was a lawyer by profession, but newly anointed as chairman of the Sub-divisional Peace Committee. In that capacity he would spy on all neighbourhoods and local officials, report to the army commander about concocted anti-state activities, and help the army raid local villages.

In a desperate act I was able to nab this man on some criminal charges, but none stuck until after liberation. After independence the man was arrested and I was asked to depose against him (although by that time I was no longer in charge of the sub-division). As I was leaving the court after deposition the man smiled at me from the dock and said my deposition would not hold, and that he would be soon free. I never knew if he was sentenced to jail, but I do know that many like him moved about freely without ever having to pay for their misdeeds.

The recent happenings make me

feel that this is 1971 all over again. We are faced with the same ideological divide that launched us into our fight for independence. We are facing the acolytes of the same belief that wanted to deny us our nationhood on the basis of our language and ethnicity and fought against us from within. We are again witnessing resurgence of a force that had never come to terms



AMRAN HOSSAIN

We need to constantly educate our next generation and remind them that religion and politics are separate. We need to educate them that we need religion in our personal lives and not in state politics. And that is the true drawing of a line in the sand.

with our right to exist as a country that put our culture, language, and ethnicity ahead of anything else.

We are again thrown back to the time when this force worked with our enemies to put an end to our struggle for independence by liquidation of our people in the darkness of night, all in the name of preserving a country that was built on a flawed ideology. Again we have a line drawn in the sand by our adversaries. And maybe it is a good thing that this is happening now.

Perhaps this new drawing of the line in the sand would not have happened had there been no Shahbagh Square uprising. Perhaps we would have allowed this cancer to grow unnoticed and gone about merrily with our politics as usual. But just as the whole Shahbagh Square movement took the nation and our political parties by storm, the fallouts of this movement

also shook the nation no end.

While the biggest outcome of the movement is the reaffirmation of our faith and firm adherence to the core ideals of our Liberation War and a renewed rejection of those who opposed those ideals, another major outcome is the demonstration of people's will to reject politics that uses religion as a platform.

when the crisis moves away. When they come back they attack with greater force and intensity.

It seems from the events of the past few days that the evil forces are flexing their muscles once again to take away the hard earned gains of our freedom. This is at a time when the majority in Bangladesh have unequivocally sworn their adherence to pursuing their dreams of a democratic society based on respect for all religions and for all humanity. This is at a time when this majority has unequivocally spurned religion based politics and its followers, particularly those who had opposed our War of Independence and had carried out murderous attacks.

The voices raised at Shahbagh Square demanded justice for an aggrieved nation for crimes that were committed against people during our War of Liberation. Unfortunately, those who we have in the dock today are a handful from among hundreds or perhaps thousands of such people who fought us on a false ideology. Maybe we can get some justice by prosecuting those we have at hand.

But what do we do about the ideologues and acolytes of this ideology who are now threatening our identity as a nation, which we are trying to build based on our core values of independence? The Shahbagh protesters may constantly remind us of these values, but how do we contain the counter values that the new-fundamentalists pose or threaten?

The enemies of our freedom struggle were not all foisted on our soil from outside. A good number came from within us, and they continue to live among us. They take the garb of religion to fight us and delude our innocent masses for their own political objectives. A ban on the activities of a political party based on its affiliation to religion may be a short term solution, but it will not be effective to alter their mindset in the long run.

For this we need a more conscious and deliberate approach to educate the whole society to take pride in our identity first as a Bengali nation, and in our culture, language and ethnicity. We need to constantly educate our next generation on this identity first, and remind them that religion and politics are separate. We need to educate them that we need religion in our personal lives and not in state politics. And that is the true drawing of a line in the sand.

The writer is a former staff member of the World Bank.

KOR KIAN BENG

NEARLY eight years ago, Kuomintang (KMT) elder Lien Chan's ice-breaking visit to Beijing helped ease tensions in one of Asia's most dangerous flashpoints and ushered in the current warm cross-strait ties.

This week's visit to the Chinese capital by Lien, now the honourary chairman of the ruling KMT, again carried much significance, which could change the tone of cross-strait ties and even break new ground in the coming years, according to observers.

First, they pointed to the timing of the four-day trip that ended yesterday, which came at the invitation of new Communist Party chief Xi Jinping. It took place just before Chinese President Hu Jintao retires next month. Hu has already relinquished the reins of the party and the military to Xi since last November.

The timing is the new Chinese supremo's affirmation of the "peaceful development" path fostered by Hu and Lien after their historic 2005 meeting, said Beijing-based analyst Li Fan.

"It signals that there will be continuity in the mainland's cross-strait policy under Xi. Lien is the best person to show the continuity since he broke the ice in 2005," said Li, who heads the World and China Institute, a private think-tank.

That meeting between Hu and Lien, who was then KMT chairman, resurrected dialogue on a party-to-party

platform between Taiwan and the mainland following their split at the end of the civil war in 1949.

The agreement that both sides inked called for the pursuit of "happiness of the people on both sides and resuming consultations on an equal footing," and the signing of a peace pact.

The agreement is widely seen as the foundation for the close cross-strait collaboration that began from 2008, after the KMT took power when its

Gou and politicians like Lien's son Sean, 43, a member of the KMT's central leadership, it included representatives from Taiwan's religious, unionist, agricultural and literary circles.

Also, the rhetoric from the "Xi-Lien" meeting on Monday showed that both sides are ready and eager to boost interaction in the political realm, say analysts. They cited how Xi, during his meeting with Lien at the Great Hall of the People, pledged to

The agreement is widely seen as the foundation for the close cross-strait collaboration that began from 2008, after the KMT took power when its new chairman Ma Ying-jeou won the presidential election that year. Ma was re-elected last year.

new chairman Ma Ying-jeou won the presidential election that year. Ma was re-elected last year.

Since 2008, both sides have inked 18 agreements, allowed direct sea, air and postal links, and signed the landmark Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, a free-trade deal, in 2010.

After four years of close economic and trade cooperation, observers say Lien's latest visit shows that China wants to expand cross-strait ties, judging from the make-up of the Taiwanese delegation of more than 30 people.

Though it comprised mostly businessmen such as Foxconn boss Terry

continue peaceful development of cross-strait ties towards the goal of peaceful reunification.

China regards Taiwan as a renegade province it would recover by force if necessary.

Reunification was reportedly not on the agenda during the 2005 meeting, which makes Xi's remarks significant, said Taiwan expert Wu Nengyuan at the Fujian Academy of Social Sciences.

He told The Straits Times: "Xi's mention of reunification signals that political dialogue could be a goal for both the KMT and the Communist Party in the next few years."

Another telling sign came from

Lien's remarks that both sides should work towards "establishing a balanced, equal and effective political structure" for peaceful and sustainable development of cross-strait relations.

According to The China Post, Lien, who met Hu on Tuesday, said talks on issues such as the setting up of military confidence-building measures and the signing of a peace treaty could begin with dialogue between experts and non-governmental groups from both sides.

Li, who has studied Taiwanese politics, believes that the rhetoric reflects a sense of urgency on both sides to get started on political dialogue within the next three years, before the next Taiwan presidential election in 2016.

One reason is the fear of a return to power by the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, whose reign from 2000 to 2008 under Chen Shui-bian saw cross-strait ties hitting a nadir.

Said Li: "The possibility of the KMT losing power is real. For the mainland, if it doesn't initiate discussions about reunification now, it may be harder to do so closer to or after Taiwan's election. But reunification is a controversial topic that could affect the KMT's chances at the next polls. So how fast to push this in the coming years is a delicate balance that both sides have to strike."

© The Straits Times (Singapore). All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.