

## Country in the spate of hartals

### A politics totally indifferent to the economy

UNFORTUNATELY, the country is being buffeted in the vortex of hartals. Since the night of Friday 6 April, when a 24-hour hartal was called to thwart the long march of Hefajat-e-Islam, up to 10 April 6 PM, we will have endured 72 hours of shutdown of the country.

We wonder whether these hartals were or are at all necessary. Regrettably, with every hartal we have witnessed a ratcheted up level of violence and destructive activities that border on subversion.

Over the last two months, political unrest and violence have taken the lives of more than a hundred fifty people apart from the severe blow that this has dealt to the economy, particularly the RMG sector. Bleeding the country, the worst sufferers being the poor, can neither be a tactic or political strategy of any political party, least of all one that aspires to power.

While there can be no justification for calling hartal, the causative factors, and the prospect of an uncertain outcome of the current flux, that we are faced with due to the concatenation of various events, can only be addressed politically, and for this the ruling alliance should take the lead.

We reiterate what we have said in the past. The AL led alliance cannot skirt the question of the modalities of holding the next parliamentary election. It is not, as the alliance avers, an issue already resolved by the Supreme Court. And while the PM has discarded the idea of CTG out of hand in her recent BBC interview, it would be a folly to believe that a parliamentary election -- held under the stipulations of the newly enacted law, with the current incumbent in charge of the government, and with the parliament in vogue -- would pass the test of transparency and fairness.

The government should also not be unaware of the political mileage it is giving to the opposition by randomly litigating the top ranking leaders of the BNP on flimsy and ridiculous charges. It does not help the prospect of peace when the main interlocutors of the major opposition party are subjected to harassment and incarceration.

## Baira goes on the offensive

### It should play its due part in the process

BANGLADESH Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) has suspended its personnel export activities for an indefinite period in protest against the government's role in recruitment in foreign job markets. The organisation claims that it had discussed and finalised with different countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Hong Kong, the process of sending workers abroad but that the state's half-hearted involvement has brought the process to a standstill.

While it had initially welcomed the government's participation in the process, the latter has failed to send workers abroad even six months into the process. The current government-to-government arrangements exclude some 1,200 registered private recruiting agencies from exporting labour and Baira has decided to disengage itself from the process until the state authorities feel their need.

We recognise Baira's significant contribution to labour export over the years, having sent abroad 8.5 million people between 1982 and 2012, with the remittance inflow crossing the US\$ 14-billion mark in 2012. We must, however, note the exorbitant costs charged to migrant workers, sometimes to the extent of exploitation, which had actually brought the government into the picture. Besides, fraudulence crept into private sector management and follow-ups avoided on the persons sent on employment abroad with the result that many of them got stranded.

The best arrangement, however, would obviously be cooperation between the government and private sector -- the former in order to cut down costs and regulate the process, the latter because of its decades of experience in managing it. To this end, we hope that Baira will sit with the government to decide on how best they can the manpower export sector hand in hand with the public sector. They should be able to strike a balance between private and public sector participation. For the benefit of our migrant workers, as well as for the good of the nation's economy overall, we hope that both parties will put in their best concerted efforts into the process of sending workers abroad.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### April 9

- 1271

In Syria, sultan Baybars conquers the Krak of Chevaliers.
- 1929

Indian Independence Movement: At the Delhi Central Assembly, Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt throw handouts and bombs to court arrest.
- 1950

India and Pakistan sign the Liaquat-Nehru Pact.
- 1942

World War II: Siege of Leningrad Soviet forces open a much-needed railway link to Leningrad.
- 1942

World War II: The Japanese take Bataan in the Philippines.

# Looking beyond the sabre rattling



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

South Korean (ROK) economy. Indeed, South Korea's stock market index has slipped to its lowest levels since November, 2012.

It is not just Korean companies that are thinking of moving production elsewhere. Going by media reports, Philippines and Thailand who have large concentrations of expatriate workers employed in the country are drawing up contingency plans to evacuate their nationals if push comes to shove. Similarly, large multinationals like the American automobile manufacturer General Motors were also looking into options to move production base outside of ROK.

The North Korean (DPRK) leadership has hedged its bets that it can intimidate its southern neighbour and allies into resuming much needed aid. Its recent action to block South Korean men and material from entering the town of Kaesong, home to a jointly-run industrial complex, would ultimately end up hurting the North more than the South. Some 123 South Korean companies operate there and four out of five have been forced to stop production. As pointed out in an article of the *Wall Street Journal* recently "with the loss of around \$90million in wage income for the foreign-currency starved country, that is almost certainly true."

By putting a halt to cross-border movement of workers and raw materials, DPRK ends up depriving its economy of both employment and foreign exchange earnings. Some 50,000 DPRK citizens are employed by the Kaesong complex each of whom earn an average of \$100-105 per month. While this is a mere 10% of what an average ROK worker may earn, that measly salary puts these workers from the north in a much better income bracket in their own country.

Yet there is method in the North's madness. The ratcheting up of military manoeuvres coupled with economic pressure which may initially point to a losing scenario for DPRK is not necessarily true. ROK President Park Geun-hye was re-elected on the promise that he would bolster the country's flagging economy and rebuild relations

## BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

It is boisterous, even maverick. Pakistan thy name is uncertainty. Yet, it is strange that whenever it is posed with pressing problems before elections, the country has always surprisingly found solutions to them. This time it has chosen an interim prime minister in former justice Hazar Khan Khoso, who will be conducting free and fair elections.

There were pulls from several parties and it seemed impossible at one time that some name would emerge as a unanimous choice for the interim prime ministership before the elections on May 11, announced recently. It was a good practice which even Bangladesh has done away with and India does not need any because the Election Commission has developed enough teeth to bring the errant parties under some discipline.

This does not mean that the coming elections in Pakistan would be impartial. Pakistan Army Chief Pervez Kayani has promised the country that the elections would be independent. It is, indeed, strange that the army wants a fair poll. But it is an open secret that the army which holds sway over Pakistan will not interfere in the elections. Still it is unfair to contend that all members of the National Assembly of Pakistan would get elected through genuine methods. The past does not say so and the future does not hold any promise.

Former President General Pervez Musharraf, who has returned to Pakistan after a self-imposed exile, gives confused messages. He would like to have impartial elections but he is the one who has interfered with polls in the past to get his favourites retained. In fact, his entry into Pakistan's politics is going to be quite a disturbance. I do not rule out that he would use some methods (even the army) to get himself elected from Karachi and few of his colleagues from elsewhere.

It is strange that the first statement that Musharraf made on reaching Pakistan is that Kargil was a "victory for the Pakistan army." It is understandable that Musharraf wants to placate the army but he cannot mutilate facts that he and his army were squarely defeated, and for him to deny the reality is the same kind of thinking which has brought him to contest the elections. People



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Though ROK's economy is far stronger than DPRK's on any given scale, it suffered badly during the global recession of 2008. The ROK economy took a turn for the worse again in 2011 when its growth rate dipped from 6.2% to 3.6%. Latest forecasts point to a further downturn. This has been brought about by booming Chinese exports. Again the weakening of the Japanese yen has seen a surge in Japanese exports. Hence, according to recent forecasts the economy is now projected to grow at a more conservative 2.3% in the current fiscal.

DPRK's brinkmanship cannot last. It is effectively under tightened UN sanctions. It cannot risk open war with its southern neighbour given the sorry state of its conventional forces. It will be outmatched on land, sea and air. This time round the North Korean leadership cannot rely on traditional allies like Russia and China to back up its claims. Indeed, from the signals coming out of Beijing, it appears that the Chinese leadership is in no mood for DPRK theatrics.

Pyongyang's threats of starting a nuclear war

in the region has met with sharp rebuke from President Xi of China who went on record to state that no country "should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for personal gain." This is perhaps the strongest worded statement ever to come out of China on its traditional ally North Korea. As former Ambassador to China John Huntsman said on CNN: "It suggests to me, as I've watched the ratcheting up of frustration among Chinese leaders over the last many years, that they've probably hit the 212-degree boiling point as it relates to North Korea."

Despite the fact that the North has moved two medium-range missiles to its east coast, the 1.2million strong military has not been mobilised to war footing. All these signs point to nothing more sabre rattling on the part of Kim Jong-Un. However, time has arrived for the young leader to face up to certain realities. With its largest and most trusted ally China joining the growing ranks of other powers in the region in its irritation over Pyongyang's shenanigans, the young Kim would be well advised to come to the negotiating table, end the North's isolation and embark on a Chinese-style economic reform programme.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

# Travails of Pakistan

know who won Kargil and no amount of Musharraf's claim can undo the truth.

The unpopularity of Musharraf could be gauged when an angry lawyer threw a shoe at the former President as he headed to court to face legal charges after returning from his four-year-long exile. In any case, this was not the first time that Musharraf had to face such a humiliation. Two years ago, a man tried to hurl a shoe at him when he was addressing a gathering in Britain.

A retired Pakistani Lt. General, Saheed Aziz, has brought out a book to nail the lie and he has alleged that the army "put our children in the line of fire." But the point that Musharraf refuses to see is that reality may complicate matters. Was it the entry of Musharraf that has pushed the Imran Khan phenomenon into the background because at one time it was taken for granted that Imran's

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Tehreek-e-Insan party would sweep the polls?

The old political complexion may continue after the next election. Punjab looks like going the Nawaz Sharif's way and Sind would stay with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The North Western Frontier Province may again be back with Awami National Party (ANP), reminding one of the red shirts under the leadership of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan during the freedom struggle. The fourth province, Baluchistan, is categorically against the PPP and may therefore return either ANP or any amalgamation of some nationalists who are still fighting against the army for their identity.

The scene does not help India in any way. In fact, Pakistan is getting murkier and murkier. First, its soldiers beheaded two Indian soldiers and now Indian prisoners are tortured to death, using racial abuses. In fact, Pakistan has to sort out the minority problem if it wants to be consid-

ered a civilised state. The main problem with Pakistan is what the students learn in schools and madrasas.

In Pakistani schools, the class V social studies text (English), taught to 12-year-olds, begins with citing the difference between Hindus and Muslims (for example, Hindus burn the wife after her husband dies but Muslims don't), the need to be aware of the hidden enemies of Pakistan (religious extremists are not mentioned) and the importance of unceasing jihad. It devotes a total of three sentences to a united Pakistan, the last of which reads: "With the help of India, East Pakistan separated."

The class VIII textbook (English) is still briefer and simply states that "some leaders of former East Pakistan with the active help of India managed to break away from Pakistan and established Bangladesh." The Class IX and Class X (Urdu) books -- by far the most detailed -- devote nearly three pages, explaining the disintegration. The listed subtitles include: a) Incompetent government of Yaha Khan; b) Hindu domination of trade; c) Nefarious role of Hindu teachers; d) Language problems; e) Indian interference; f) The elections of 1970.

Meanwhile, on February 5 the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) found Abdul Quader Molla guilty of five out of six charges against him. Known as Mirpur Koshai (Butcher of Mirpur) because of his atrocities against the citizens in the Mirpur area of Dhaka, he was charged with beheading a poet, raping an 11-year-old girl and murdering 344 people. The ICT sentenced Molla, presently assistant secretary general of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, to life in prison. For the protesters at the Shahbagh Square, this was not enough -- they want the mullah to be hanged. On the other side, the Jamaat protested violently and also staged demonstrations. But its efforts to influence global opinion foundered in spite of a well-funded attempt.

Curiously enough, Molla's case has been taken up by the government of Turkey. President Abdullah Gul sent a letter last month to the president of Bangladesh requesting clemency for all those accused of mass murder. Fortunately, Turkey's president appears to be an exception and much of the world has shown little regard for genocidal killers.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.