

It is only a temporary relief

Let the opposition stop calling hartal and govt. create enabling environment

WE welcome the opposition party's desisting from calling a nationwide shutdown for 17 and 18 April in light of the Lungal Bandh Snan or Holy Bath. It is a good gesture no doubt but may we add that they should have been also considerate to the lakhs of HSC, O' and A'Level students whose exam schedules have been badly upset by their frequent hartals

They have, however, only postponed it by a few days, having decided in principle to call the same next week, which might even extend to a three-day, non-stop hartal. Thus the relief is only transient. With six countrywide shutdowns having been called already this month, not to mention a series of district-based hartals, we would call into question the relentless shutdown programmes that the opposition has embarked upon.

Also at their mercy is the fate of the national economy, where growth figures are having to be whittled down. The World Bank has revised the nation's forecast for fiscal 2012-13 down from the government's target of 7.2 per cent to 5.8 percent. Having already lost garment export orders of some 300 million USD, the FBCCI has fervently requested the opposition to reconsider their non-cooperation strategy in light of the dire straits which the industry and overall economy are in. To this, the leader of the opposition has unfortunately responded by claiming that there is no alternative to shutdowns.

They need to think out of the box drawing on their intrinsic strength as a major political party and shun hartal in greater national interest.

At the same time, the government, too, must eschew its strategy of en masse case filing and arrest of most central and some mid-level opposition leaders, not to mention the undignified manner of hauling them away to prison in chains. We would ask for immediate release of all detained leaders. This will not only help to ease the political tension to which the nation has been held hostage for the past several months, but also smoothen the path for political dialogue which is needed as an immediate remedy to the current political impasse.

Attack at a Baishakhi fair

Another act of cultural subversion

THE cocktail blasts at Baishakhi mela (fair) at the remote Atrai upazila in Naogaon district that hurt 10 including children is an ominous reminder of how vulnerable our national cultural symbols, especially the events that mark them, are from detractors' wrath. So intense was the terrorists' hatred towards our culture that even children who went to enjoy the yearly event were not spared.

We have no words to condemn the perpetrators of the heinous act of violence. The law-enforcers must ferret out the terrorists responsible for the dastardly act and mete out exemplary punishment to them.

We may recall the horrors that visited the Udichi's cultural event at Jessore on the night of March 7 in 1999 and the Ramna bBotomul Baishakhi fair in 2001. There are still other instances of violence at cultural events of similar nature at different places in the past. Some of those incidents took their bloody tolls.

Unfortunately, the perpetrators, in most cases, could successfully escape the noose of the law. Even those behind deadly bomb explosions at Udichi event in Jessore and the Ramna Botomul Baishakhi mela could not be identified, far less brought to justice, after the lapse of so many years.

The fallout of the police's failure to apprehend and punish the terrorists has been that those who are targeting the symbols of Bengali culture and heritage are getting bolder by the day.

The attack at the Atrai Baishakhi mela is a pointer to the fact that the enemies of Bengali culture are on the prowl and would hit its symbols whenever and wherever they find any lapse in the security arrangements surrounding the events.

In this context, we have to say that while the Baishakhi mela in Dhaka was held under tight security that of Atrai fell prey to a heinous attack, thanks to insufficient secu-

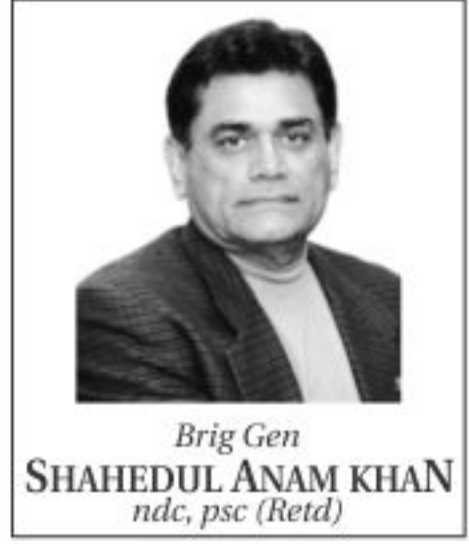
THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 18

- 1946**
The International Court of Justice holds its inaugural meeting in The Hague, Netherlands.
- 1954**
Gamal Abdul Nasser seizes power in Egypt.
- 1980**
The Republic of Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) comes into being, with Canaan Banana as the country's first President. The Zimbabwe Dollar replaces the Rhodesian Dollar as the official currency.
- 1992**
General Abdul Rashid Dostum revolts against President Mohammad Najibullah of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and allies with Ahmed Shah Massoud to capture Kabul.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Politics with Medina Charter



NOT since I was studying history in school that I have heard the phrase, "Medina Charter" being uttered

so randomly than in the last one month. Talk-show 'masters' and politicians, particularly those belonging to the ruling party, have referred to the historic document in the course of discussions very often in recent times.

The Charter has been referred to in particular after the 13-point demand of Hefajat-e-Islam (HI) was placed to the government. The demands appear, to a great many people, to be regressive and run contrary to the fundamental principles of the country's constitution.

However, it also appears that the Charter is being flaunted against the Islamists almost as a defensive expedient, nay a shield against their onslaught, being carried out with the single purpose of establishing an Islamic regime in the country. It is interesting also to note that none of the Islamic parties including the Jamaat -- and the Islamic parties are a fractured lot today -- have so far referred to the Charter at all.

It is just as well that the Charter has come to the forefront of national discourse, more so after the PM had referred to it very recently while countering the 13-point demands of HI. She made a bold statement, wittingly or otherwise one cannot say, when she affirmed that the country would be run as per the Charter of Medina and the farewell sermon of the Holy Prophet (pbuh).

Having uttered these words, the PM should be ready to receive flak from particularly those who are irked by references to anything even remotely related to Islam and politics. I suspect these people are perturbed by the fact that the so-called secular credentials of the constitution would be sullied by any reference to the Medina Charter. And to some, her remarks betray a confused mind, quite at a loss as to how to assuage the frayed mind of the Islamists and those that have joined



It is an inclusive society that we want, where peaceful coexistence must be established even with those that do not conform to our beliefs and mores, and as the Prophet (pbuh) has demonstrated, even those that hold different views of religion and God have the right to coexist and the state has the obligation to protect.

ranks with them by offering their support. And some have reacted to the PM with a mono-syllabic response -- "really?"

It is just as well that the first of the world's socio-political covenants is being recalled. The current situation in the country makes the Charter so very relevant, and thus worth reflecting upon. And if some of the religious groups, as well those who want a secular and pluralistic society in Bangladesh (and I believe that this group is in the majority), were to

scrutinise every single clause of the charter objectively, shedding their blinkered view, they would find that in the prevalent turbulent atmosphere in the country, taking lessons from not only the final document but also understanding the background that led to the formulation of the Charter may help attenuate the current abrasive situation.

The Medina Charter was a social contract formulated more than a thousand years before such an idea was theorised in the west during the

Age of Enlightenment, and was based not on the abstract but on an "actual agreement involving people."

It was a classic case of resolution of longstanding dispute in Medina by abjuring violence and by engaging in discussions to regain peace, and where the Holy Prophet (PBUH) played the mediator's role -- a remarkable achievement given that he represented a religious group which at that point in time was only just growing in size -- through display of mutual respect of every community, and where, shedding past practice, tribal and ethnic interests were subordinated to that of the entire community.

It was a unifying charter that embraced, within the rubric of the city state, all the different faiths and beliefs, as one single community. It was thus not "us" and "they" but "we," and the residents of the city state were united not under one religion but, "under one banner of ethical living and moral principles -- commonalities between all humans and all religions." That dissolved the notion of "majority" and "minority." It was the basis of a truly a pluralistic society.

I choose to be neither a critic nor a cynic, and in all fairness to the PM, am rather inclined to believe that even though the reference to the Charter, as being the guiding principle for running the country may be a riposte to the HI, I would like to believe that it is the spirit of the Charter that she was alluding to, a spirit which, if embedded in our way of life, might help remove much of the differences that exist in our society.

There are lessons for all of us here. It is an inclusive society that we want, where peaceful coexistence must be established even with those that do not conform to our beliefs and mores, and as the Prophet (pbuh) has demonstrated, even those that hold different views of religion and God have the right to coexist and the state has the obligation to protect. No one has the right to denounce any particular group.

One would hope that our leaders would refer to the Charter not as a political expedient but as a means of making the society truly inclusive.

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India needs a national government

RAJINDER PURI

HERE seems to be a crisis developing within the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The BJP and Janata Dal (United) are threatening to split on the issue of selecting the next prime ministerial candidate. The race for occupying the PM's post after the next general election is in full swing. One wonders why. There are a few aspirants openly in the fray. Others are lurking in the shadows. What motivates all these aspirants?

Elections are almost a full year away. No party has the numbers to form the government. The results are unpredictable. Yet chickens are being counted before eggs are hatched. Anyone having the faintest acquaintance with India's current situation would consider the task of pulling the nation out of its present crisis so daunting as to think twice before aspiring for the post. Provided, of course, the aspirant is concerned with the exercise of real power to change the situation and not merely with acquiring a celebrity status and the accompanying perks and patronage of office that are confused with power.

Consider India's present situation. The economy has sunk to its lowest rate of growth in years. Inflation has sent prices rocket high. Our manufacturing sector is languishing badly and unemployment is rising. Never has crime been so rampant. Corruption is becoming more widespread and brazen by the day.

Governance has collapsed. All norms that determine relations between the central government and the states seem to have vanished. Terrorism continues unabated in the

nation. Separatist insurgencies remain unresolved. The Kashmir crisis continues to destabilise. Relations with China and Pakistan continue to remain uncertain and fraught with danger. India's rating internationally continues to plummet. The nation which stood poised for a global role a few years ago is being perceived as rapidly sinking to

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the level of a banana republic. By any objective standard this is a fair evaluation.

So, one would like to ask all the aspirants for the prime minister's post; tell the nation what you would like the government to do in order to address these problems. Do not tell us what you do not want. Every politician in India is very vocal about that. Tell us what you do want. Tell us in precise terms what is your solution for Kashmir. Tell us your solution to deal with Pakistan. Tell us your solution to contain China. Tell us your solution to curb corruption. Tell us your solution to restore law

and order in the state. Tell us your solution to address the complaints of state governments. Tell us your proposals for systemic reform. One suspects that the aspirants will have nothing to say on most of these topics. Or, at best, they would mouth inane platitudes instead of stating specific solutions. The truth is that politicians do not know what they want to do. They only want to occupy high office. And this, when India is poised at a most critical period which can permanently make or mar its future.

The trouble arises from politicians failing to understand power. The prime minister's office offers prospect of power. But so do other posts. At different times of history power has been exercised not by the PM but by incumbents of other posts. Kamaraj as Congress president exercised decisive power.

Today, the PM is not most powerful. Maximum power is being exercised by the occupant of the constitutional post of Chairperson, National Advisory Council (NAC). Do any of our ambitious aspirants for power ever consider who will occupy this constitutional post after the next general election and how it could be utilised to influence policy? Party presidents, coalition chairpersons, prime ministers and NAC chairperson can all exercise power if they have anything to contribute.

The president of India can exercise most power if the incumbent has any regard for the Constitution. The maximum power in recent Indian history was exercised, of course, by someone who shunned all posts. He was Mahatma Gandhi.

When there is war all political

rivals unite to protect the nation. What our politicians need to ponder is whether the silent multi-faceted crisis overtaking India is any less grim than the threat of war. Should not political rivals therefore unite to confront the challenge and preserve the nation? The lead obviously should come from the Congress and BJP. The leaders of these parties should invite all their counterparts from other parties to discuss and formulate a precise vision document that would put the nation back on the rails within five years through appropriate systemic reforms.

Following that, an agreed agenda should be drawn up to implement the reforms. And finally the norms of running a national government that co-opts all consenting parties should be devised before actually forming a national government that would within one term pull India out of the hole it has dug itself into. Only after that might the nation revert to normal multi-party electoral politics. Are Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh, Advani and Rajnath Singh listening?

This idea may appear wild and utopian today. If the present political decline through drift continues, how will it appear one year later? It is time to forget the divisions of the past and project a vision of the future. When faced with a national crisis our leaders might falter, the public has always given a magnificent response. The Sino-Indian conflict of 1962 and the Emergency proved that. Let politicians sincerely lead. The whole nation will follow.

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The writer is a veteran journalist and cartoonist.

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