

INTERVIEW

'How much more do we need to take in for a wake-up call?'

Eminent jurist Dr. Kamal Hossain talks with A.B.M. Shamsud Doza of The Daily Star about the recent violence centering Hefajat-e-Islam's programme.

The Daily Star (TDS): What is your reaction to the widespread eruption of violence that centered on the Hefajat-e-Islam's programme last Sunday? Dr. Kamal Hossain (KH): I am very disturbed by what happened last Sunday. Our expectations from a working democracy and an elected government have not been realised, and we find instead that the elected government has itself contributed to the situation. They have not taken the people into confidence and the parliament has not engaged itself in these issues. It seems that no one was clear about what was going on that day. Whether Hefajat-e-Islam would get the permission or not, whether they would sit in or not. When things got out of hand, the government claimed that they had only allowed a 'peaceful' blockade in six places. I do not know of any democratic system that allows a blockade in the capital for an entire day. What cost does it impact? Apart from an economic cost, what is the political cost? How does the world view this: A government that has been unable to protect its city? Certain mysteries need to also be addressed. How can you have a minister in the government, where his party supports Hefajat-e-Islam? Government had sent



Dr. Kamal Hossain

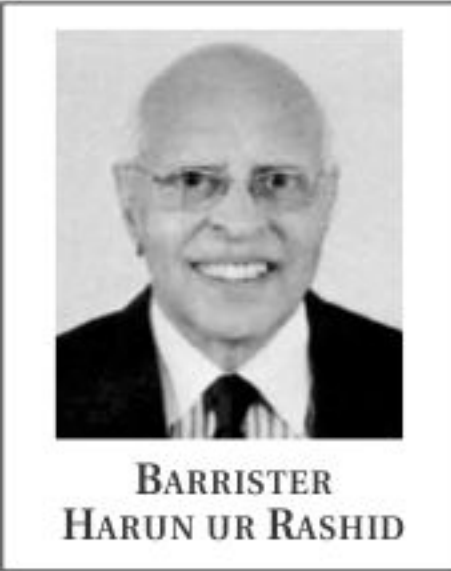
Dr. Hasan Mahmud to sort out issues with Hefajat leaders claiming to have achieved a positive contribution in restoring normalcy. We would like to know from him the subject of his discussions and the intention or objective of the visit which he thought to be a positive contribution. We had not heard of the 13-point demands before. Was this or was it not mentioned to the minister? The home minister instead congratulated them for having come here, acknowledging the permission granted for this blockade. I have never heard of a government-organised blockade before. I wonder under which political and legal context this had been done. TDS: How do you look at the government's role in handling this situation? For the time, the government has dispersed the Hefajat-e-Islam gathering, but do you think it is the end of the game? KH: Prevention is better than cure. Even after the experience of the first visit of the Hefajat-e-Islam, did the government learn any lesson or start working on taking the people into confidence? If there is any demand to be made to the government, then one should send their representative, have a formal sitting, voice their demands, which, if it requires further consideration, can then be sent to the parliament for further discussions and debates. That is an ideal democratic process. The government should keep citizens informed and aware of the procedures and negotiations. Given the eruption that took place, the government could have prevented it. They could have not allowed this meeting to take place at all. Regarding the 13-point demands, the government could have addressed it through asking the public. I find that everything which is being done has zero respect for the general public. It

is democratic neither in principal not in practice. The general secretary of Awami League had used some extraordinary language -- urging the use of force against the Hefajat people to disperse them -- going further to explain that it would be ensured they did not even come out of their homes. It is unimaginable that any citizen, no matter which group he belongs to, should be threatened. How can you call yourself democratic if you force people to remain within their homes and confines? A government working within the constitution cannot function this way. They must respect the constitution and the rights of the opposition. TDS: Do you think there are forces behind the scene who are trying to manipulate Hefajat's programme? KH: What methods does the government use to identify the activities taking place behind the scenes? They never let the public know, but project an understanding that shows everything to be ok. And when things go wrong, they start accusing other forces of being involved against them. But when and how have you discovered that fact? If you cannot figure out the crisis, then you should explain yourself and accept your own failures. Why is it that at the 11th hour you suddenly learn of certain incidents? The government's permission to enforce this blockade is what troubles me most. This is where Khaleda Zia too can follow the government: if the government allows a mass sitting then she of course will support it. If Ershad can support it, so can she. In my eyes, they cannot support something like this as such because we are all bound by the constitution and yet they themselves have spoken in different tones encouraging a disrespect of the constitution. TDS: How can we get out of this violent politics?

KH: Unfortunately, there is no harmony between the political parties, even within the same party and alliance. How unhealthy have things turned that not only do we fail to respect each other sitting in opposition, but fail to do so with those in the alliance. This cannot be called a civilised political behaviour. This kind of lacking in political integrity has become a matter of concern. I shall not dwell into how they have dealt with the opposition and the dialogue that really needs to be arranged, but this issue had been raised almost a year ago and they have been late in drawing their attention towards it. But we had mentioned this even when the first amendment was made without a dialogue. We had not voted for the 15th Amendment. Can they look back to any of their manifestos and explain where they were allowed to do this? Do they not know that in a democratic practice they would have a fundamental constitutional issue if you do not have a mandate from the people that you are not supposed to do this? It is a complete mistake to believe that since we have the majority of votes we can do anything. Can they use the majority while setting up a monarchy? Of course not. Based on the recent tragedy in Savar, and what happened last night, how much more do we really need to take in for a wake-up call? In democracy, we need to make ourselves heard. If we are source of power and power is with us, with power comes responsibly and we cannot shed away our responsibility. All citizens from all districts, departments and professions and political parties must speak out, and not speak in the language of force but in the language of persuasion through reasons and facts and by appealing to the values we all support in the constitution.

BOTTOM LINE

Bangladesh-Sri Lanka to boost bilateral ties



DIPLOMATIC relations between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh were formally established in 1972 and the Sri Lanka High Commission in Bangladesh was set up in June 1979. The Protocol signed in April 2003 provides an institutional framework to review the full range of Bangladesh-Sri Lanka bilateral relations at the meetings at foreign secretary level. The first meeting took place in Dhaka in January 2011. At the second foreign secretary level consultation, the Bangladesh delegation led by Foreign Secretary M. Shahidul Haque visited Colombo on April 21 for three days and had a meeting with his counterpart Karunatilaka Amanugama on April 22.

It is reported that many significant decisions were taken at the meeting between the foreign secretaries. Firstly it was decided that two working groups would be set up to examine the potential for enhanced trade and maritime connectivity between the two countries. Second, both sides agreed to reduce tariffs at a faster rate, remove non-tariff barriers and para-tariff measures, and rationalise sensitive lists under Safta. They also agreed to launch discussions on a trade framework which could form a basis for Free Trade Agreement between the two nations, perhaps starting with a Preferential Trade Agreement. Third, both sides agreed to accord greater emphasis on enhanced maritime connectivity between the ports of the two countries. Fourth, both sides considered ways and means to enhance cooperation in the areas of culture, vocational training and agriculture. That Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are politically close to each other is demonstrated by the fact that Foreign Secretary Haque reportedly reaffirmed Bangladesh's support to Sri Lanka at international fora and that Bangladesh would stand by Sri Lanka on human rights issue. Although the second US resolution was passed on Sri Lanka's violation of human rights at the United Nations Human Rights Council in March, the Sri Lankan government was successful in hosting the Commonwealth

Summit in November. At the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group Meeting on April 26, which was chaired by the Bangladesh foreign minister, Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma reportedly said that Sri Lanka had been discussed at a meeting in London, and added: "No member government has indicated remotely that it wishes to change the venue." It may be recalled that Bangladesh bilateral relationship was strengthened by bi-lateral visits at the highest political level since late '70s. In April 2003, former Sri Lankan President, Ms. Chandrika Kumaratunga paid a two- day visit to Bangladesh and held talks with former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia to reinforce bilateral cooperation in various sectors. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's three-day visit to Bangladesh from April 18, 2011 is of immense significance in terms of bilateral relations as both countries share commonality on many issues.

Both countries are rich in entrepreneurial spirit and there is no reason why they, with their innovative private sectors and democratic governments, cannot cooperate with each other to enter the rank of middle-income countries in the near future.

In the recent past, the Sri Lankan foreign minister and industries minister visited Bangladesh and discussed with their Bangladesh counterparts the areas of possible cooperation. In 2008, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh reactivated the Joint Committee for Economic and Technical Cooperation which was set up in 1985 to extend cooperation in trade, tourism, cottage industries and shipping. In October 2010, a business delegation from SLBCCI visited Sri Lanka with the objective of increasing investment and trade opportunities. The delegation initiated linkages that would lead to the establishment of joint ventures and technology transfers between the two countries. It is noted that the regional trade among South Asian countries constitutes only 6.1% compared to Asean's 40%. During the 2011-12 fiscal year, the total bilateral trade stood at \$ 83.19 million, of which \$45 million was Bangladesh's trade with Sri Lanka.. There is

huge potential for expansion of trade between the two countries. Bangladesh's leather, ceramic and jute products, and Sri Lanka's coconuts and its products, tea, gems and rubber offer good prospects of expansion of trade relations between them. About 15,000 Sri Lankans are currently employed in Bangladesh. There is growing technical co-operation in the production of garments between the two countries. Mid-management level instructors of Bangladesh Institute of Fashion and Technology receive training related to ready-made garments industry, pattern on garments, marketing and quality control in Sri Lanka's Clothing Industry Training Institute. Some Sri Lankan garment exporters have moved to Bangladesh for its cheap labour and duty-free access to developed countries. Sri Lanka invested about \$292 million in Bangladesh in various ventures. 45 Sri Lankan companies have been registered with Bangladesh Board of Investment. Many Bangladeshi companies have identified Sri Lanka as another destination to set up their branches and manufacturing plants. A few Bangladeshi companies are engaged in the construction industry and other infrastructure development projects in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan pharmaceutical sector was identified as another potential investment sector. Bangladesh also hosts more than 500 Sri Lankan medical students who are studying on a self-pay basis as of 2009. There has been discussion to increase bilateral relations and cooperation between the two navies and sending of Sri Lankan Naval personnel to study in Bangladesh. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka participate in the joint peace keeping exercises under the UN department of peacekeeping operations. There are goodwill visits at the level of chiefs of armed forces between the two countries. Both countries are rich in entrepreneurial spirit and there is no reason why they, with their innovative private sectors and democratic governments, cannot cooperate with each other to enter the rank of middle-income countries in the near future.

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Sheikh Hasina talks to CNN on Rana Plaza disaster

SHAHABUDDIN AHMAD

CHRISTIANE Amanpour interviewed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina via satellite a few days ago on the Rana Plaza collapse. The prime minister repeatedly said that "accidents can take place." She was right because accidents take place anywhere and anytime all over the world. But the collapse of Rana Plaza was not an accident over which there was no control at public and private levels because 'building collapse' and fires in the garment sector during the last 13 years have been occurring at regular intervals. Rana Plaza was approved for construction as a five-storied building but four more floors were added to it without any approval from the government agency. This lapse went unnoticed. It is here that the prime minister's assertion was far from the ground reality. Amanpour asked the prime minister whether this lapse was overlooked as the owner of Rana Plaza was connected with the party in power. The prime minister denied this allegation forcefully and said that as soon as she came to know about the collapse she directed the AL students' wing of the locality to rush to the spot. Here also, I feel she did not act with wisdom. During the interview, the prime minister at times could not maintain her composure and at times she was on the defensive, while replying to the interviewer. Amanpour said that they wanted to send representatives to Dhaka to report the accident first-hand but the Bangladesh Embassy in the US did not provide them any visas. In this connection, the prime minister asserted that there was press freedom in Bangladesh and at the same time also mentioned that every country has rules and regulations to govern the visa regime. I think Bangladesh lost a golden opportunity to use CNN, a multilingual TV channel, for a wider coverage of the tragedy. This, along with the prime minister's appeal, could impress upon the big buyers that they should pay more for purchasing garments from Bangladesh, which can help the garment producing factories pay more wages to their workers and take steps for safety, security, fire fighting arrangements and other issues. As a matter of fact, it would have been proper if, instead of refusing visa to CNN, the international electronic media were encouraged to send their reporting teams to the site. This way, the prime minister's appeal to the international buyers for higher prices could be widely publicised. This did not happen because the information department of the government was perhaps not experienced in this matter. On the other hand, the home minister turned down the offer of international technical assistance. This was none of his business. The prime minister said that the government was looking into the causes of the accident and had set up inquiry committees and authorised certain government institutions for taking legal actions in the matter. But the past records of handling such situations show that the government and the agencies become alert instantly but, as days pass by, their agility and ability to make amendments to the law and in administration of the law recedes. It should be remembered that Bangladesh is not the only country in the world which, due to large scale unemployment, can offer cheap garments. Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and some African countries are supplying garments at highly competitive prices. It is, therefore, proper that the government and the private sector must act as good marketing and sales persons while dealing with not only the buyers but also the media, which have international appeal and influence on the big business houses abroad. If the foreign exchange earned annually from the garment sector is not available in the near future, because of inept handling of incidents like Rana Plaza, I think the finance minister will find it difficult to present the budget for the year 2013-2014, and we may face a situation when millions of garments workers will be on the streets shouting various slogans which may not be palatable. Lastly, we must not forget that our case for GSP facility by the US is pending final hearing. The garment factory owners particularly are keeping their fingers cross as various actions by the Bangladesh government have already irked the US administration, it is learned reliably.

The writer is Editor, The Travel World.