

Fair deal for all

A wind of change awaited

IT is not merely sympathy but also a sense of ownership, responsibility and accountability on a world scale that is being drawn by us in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster. The terrible human cost exacted through building collapse in Savar preceded by Tazrin and Spectrum fires has stirred the world's conscience. How that translates into tangible corrective action is put under the radar screen.

We note that the UN and the USA have expressed serious concern over the dire state of insecurity, our garment workers, most of them women, have to work in. What's more, they have nudged the international buyers and clothing brands to work with Bangladesh government and all stakeholders to improve working conditions for the country's garment workers. The central emphasis ought to be on collective but definable obligations of the buyers, sellers, apex bodies, governments, consumers, and above all, the working classes who, too, should have a voice in shaping the deal.

The buying brands in particular have been used to low prices and yet good quality products from Bangladesh. The cheap prices passed for competitiveness. In this exploitative process, garment exporters and buying brands benefited whilst the workers lost out.

Rather than withdrawal of access to our apparel products, the buying countries as well as their brands should offer fair prices to our exports and apply leverage in an affirmative manner thereby to ensure that our garment sector rids itself of the vulnerability to recurrent disasters.


Recovering Reshma

We salute the recovery team!

THE recovery, alive, of the young Reshma from the rubble of the Rana Plaza building on the seven-teenth day of the rescue operations is nothing short of a miracle. That she survived is a matter of both her courage and the mysterious ways in which Creation works. That the rescue team discovered her alive and brought her out to safety is an instance of good, focused teamwork in trying circumstances.

With as many as 1,058 bodies having been recovered from the rubble of the building in Savar, there is hardly any way in which we can put our grief aside and go about our usual business. At a time such as this, it becomes the moral responsibility of all to stand beside the families of the dead, and point to them a way to the future. For those who have survived, the initial job is to get them out of their trauma and help them to move on.

Finally, we pay a very well-deserved tribute to everyone involved in the recovery mission -- the army, Rab, police, fire service and citizens across the spectrum -- for a job done in splendid manner. They have demonstrated to the country and to the world that when it comes to a crisis, Bangladesh's people are capable of helping themselves out of a bind. To all these brave men who have toiled for days and nights (one has even died in the line of duty), we say with pride: "A grateful nation salutes you!"



Case for a CTG

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

ADMITTEDLY, there is a general consensus on the caretaker government (CTG) among the public. A recent countrywide poll by the Prothom Alo shows that ninety percent of those polled wants a caretaker government to conduct the next election.

The moot point of contention behind the current political turmoil is the issue of the neutral caretaker government. While the BNP is adamantly espousing the cause, the AL with equal vehemence is rejecting any idea of elections conducted by unelected people.

The attention of the world has been on Bangladesh for several months now because of the political turmoil it has been passing through. The focus has been all the more intensified recently because of the Rana Plaza disaster.

The ratcheted up heat in the political arena with the Hefajat-e-Islam's siege of Dhaka and two huge rallies, spate of BNP-alliance hartals since January, Jamaat's violence, particularly after the announcement of sentences by the ICTs, and lastly, the manner of dispersing Hefajat's rally, which has been seized upon by the detractors of the government to spin ludicrous tales about the number of casualties, has cast the nation into an uncertain orbit.

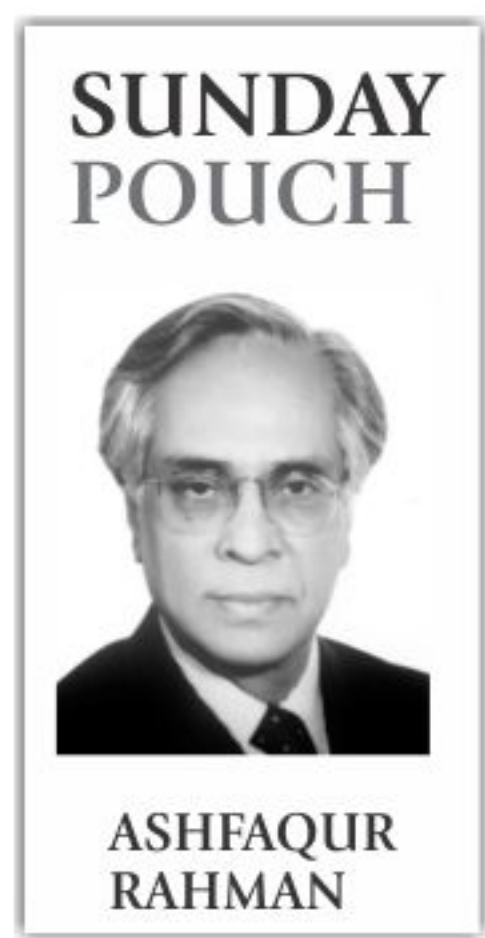
Political unrest has cost the lives of hundreds since January of this year, and some foreign media have forecast turbulent days ahead that might cost more lives. The country had been disappointed by the false dawns that had appeared several times with the two major parties holding out the prospects of dialogue, only to retract.

The latest chance for ending the present impasse need not be squandered and the PM's offer for dialogue should not be spurned only because there was no mention of anything about caretaker government in that.

We also feel that stated rigid positions should be shunned by both parties, and the AL and BNP should immediately sit to resolve the modus of conducting an election that would be acceptable to all the parties, whatever one may like to call the agreed arrangement. That is the only way to end the present imbroglio.

THE WRITER IS EDITOR, OP-ED & STRATEGIC ISSUES, THE DAILY STAR.

Sprinting towards red lines!



SUNDAY
POUCH

ASHFAQUR
RAHMAN

Let the events of last week be a lesson for all of us. Let the government continue to strictly maintain law and order and provide necessary security for people to carry on their daily business. If the opposition parties have a political message to convey to the people let them do it peacefully. Hefajat must find ways to relay their message by persuasion and advocacy,

LAST week was about running towards red lines. These are imaginary lines etched in our perception about the limits which our common wisdom will tolerate with regard to misdemeanour. Beyond the red line there is danger of public retaliation. Political events recently challenged our common weal.

It all began with the Awami League inviting the opposition to sit down to talks about the forthcoming national elections. To the skeptics, it was really a talk about the talks. To the optimist it was a return to political sense. For a couple of days we were basking in hope. Then hope abandoned us. We had perhaps forgotten about the long announced May 5 Hefajat-e-Islam blockade of Dhaka city to press their 13-point socio-religious demands.

The day began with thousands of Hefajatis blocking the seven entry points to the city. They had earlier petitioned the government to allow them to end the day by organising a rally at Shapla Chattar in Motijheel. The government had refused their request but at the last minute gave permission with the condition that they should leave the area peacefully by 6 p.m. After all, the leader of the Hefajat-e-Islam is a venerable old man who had kept his word a few days back when he dispersed the huge crowds at the end of a Long March exactly at 5 pm on that day.

But then something was amiss this time. The crowds gathering were a restless lot. It seemed that they were looking for trouble. Militant elements resorted to sporadic arson. Scuffles with law enforcers ensued. There was no sight of their leader. Reports said that he was on his way to the meeting in Shapla Chattar but a telephone call had dissuaded him. A crowd without a

leader becomes a mob. And a part of the crowd went on a rampage. Roadside shops were burnt, offices, including the office of a political party, were ransacked and cars torched. The law enforcers then moved in and cleared the huge crowd in the Chattar in the wee hours of the following morning. Several persons were reported to have been killed in the action.

So what really happened? The people need credible answers, and quickly. The leader of the Hefajat as well as the government should come out with their versions in writing. Let the people decide on what to disagree. Only two days back a brief press note was issued by the home ministry barely touching a salient aspect of the incidents.

What did the BNP have to do with all this? It is curious that just before the Dhaka blockade it had switched from talks with the government to giving it a 48-hour ultimatum to concede to its demand to have a caretaker government to conduct the next elections. So it seemed to have boarded the Hefajat bus to bend the government to its will. A public announcement was made to the people of Dhaka to come to the aid of Hefajat during the rally. But politics is the art of compromise, and it is foolish to lock oneself into a box. The government took the cue and ended the blockade by force, and also neutralised the ultimatum.

What red lines seem to have been crossed? Everyone in Bangladesh is free to express his or her views, including Hefajat. But the government invited trouble when it allowed Hefajat to express their socio-religious views in a political type rally. Why was permission given for congregation of hundreds of thousands of people at

such a sensitive and vulnerable location in Dhaka, Motijheel commercial area? This is no place for political rallies. It was like inviting a bull into a china shop. And the bulls indeed went loose.

Then again, why were the participants allowed to carry sticks when they came together to express views and give vent to their feelings? With the media giving minute by minute coverage of the unfolding events, it was just the prescription for raising mass psychosis of fear. A stick in many countries is acknowledged as a "threatening weapon."

On the other hand, Hefajat seemed to have broken their promise to disperse from the rally at the promised time. The government had taken the Hefajat leader at his word. But little did it know that many in their ranks were determined to go their own way. The leader himself was not in control over his followers he had brought to Dhaka in such numbers. Did our intelligence services know about this?

Then there is the question of using children in such gatherings. How irresponsible it was to bring boys between the age of 14 and 18 to such rallies. What message were their teachers and elders giving them? The right place for these boys to be, on the evening of May 5, was at their study tables and not in Shapla Chattar. They were hungry and leaderless (most of the leaders had left the Chattar early in the night). These poor boys faced the full force of the law enforcers in the wee hours.

In our calculation, it was the people in general who lost out again. Public and private property had been damaged, stolen, ripped off or burnt. The trust of the people on some of the major players that day seemed misplaced.

Let the events of last week be a lesson for all of us. Let the government continue to strictly maintain law and order and provide necessary security for people to carry on their daily business. If the opposition parties have a political message to convey to the people let them do it peacefully. Hefajat must find ways to relay their message by persuasion and advocacy.

The people are watching and waiting. This time round they lost. The ballot box may speak clearly on their behalf when elections are held.

THE WRITER IS A FORMER AMBASSADOR AND A COMMENTATOR ON CURRENT AFFAIRS.
E-MAIL: ASHFAQUE303@GMAIL.COM

Tiptoeing in Rakhine state

NIRMAL GHOSH

THE word used in its report to describe the Rohingya Muslims, "Bengali," shows how cautious Myanmar's independent Rakhine Commission has been.

The Commission, tasked to investigate the violence in Rakhine state last year that left over 200 dead and over 100,000 displaced, released its report on Monday last week. A week later, President Thein Sein revealed in a televised speech that he had adopted its recommendations. Ten committees have been set up to work on them.

A member of the Commission told *The Straits Times*: "We had to walk a very fine line."

"You can't be idealistic on the Rakhine state issue. The threat of violence is very real. The outside world wanted us to use the term 'Rohingya' but if we had, there would have been bloodshed the very next day."

So it called the Rohingya "Bengali"-- the politically correct term in the Rakhine and Burman context. The Rohingya, who bore the brunt of the violence that one international rights group has described as "ethnic cleansing," are not one of Myanmar's official ethnic groups. The majority Buddhist Rakhines see them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh swamping and Islamising the state.

In its recommendations, the Commission focused on the politically feasible: doubling security forces in the state and for Myanmar to "immediately" resolve Rohingyas' citizenship status and recognise their basic human rights.

The proposal for resolving the Rohingyas' citizenship status may have far-reaching consequences if executed honestly and speedily.

But it will be a fraught task, given the challenges. The fear that the Rohingyas are bent on Islamising Rakhine is shared by many among the Burman Buddhist majority elsewhere in the country. In recent weeks, the violence has spread to central Myanmar and morphed into a general anti-Muslim movement driven by radical right-wing Buddhist monks.

Also, Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Act denies citizenship to anyone who cannot prove their ancestors had lived in the country since 1823 -- setting a high bar for the Rohingyas seeking citizenship.

The citizenship issue is a minefield. The president said: "The government will deal with the citizenship-related issues by adopting short, medium and long-term strategies."

He was being honest, analysts say, when he cautioned: "This is a situation that requires time and careful handling. We have to ensure that we do not inadvertently create additional difficulties when we address it. We ask everyone to recognise that this is a complex and sensitive issue that requires wise, careful as well as decisive action."

Underscoring the sensitivity of the issue, last month, seven Rohingyas were arrested at a displacement camp in Rakhine after an altercation with officials who tried to make them register as "Bengalis" on a regional census form. They refused for fear that saying in writing that they were Bengali would jeopardise their chances at citizenship.



AFP

The Rakhine Commission has come under fire from some human rights advocates. Britain-based academic and activist Maung Zarni last week wrote that the president and his allies were "increasingly using various crisis inquiry commissions... as public relations instruments to deflect public attention from its spectacular failures in handling popular discontent, state-sponsored violence against civilian populations, and mass ethno-religious violence."

The New York-based Human Rights Watch said the report had failed to fix accountability and missed an opportunity to review the 1982 Citizenship Act.

But many analysts disagreed. "The critics can afford to be absolutist," said a Yangon-based analyst who asked not to be named. "But if they want the 1982 citizenship law to be amended, they are not going to get it. If they want the term Rohingya used, they are not going to get it. They will get what is politically possible in this climate."

Another Myanmar analyst, Mael Raynaud, wrote in an e-mail message: "The Commission seems to have done a very good job in a situation where it cannot be seen as attacking anyone directly. This is the context in Myanmar, and given that context, what we have here is an excellent report on which basis a lot can be done."

The Commission member who spoke to *The Straits Times* said the government was serious about implementing the proposals. But he admitted: "The threat of violence is a deterrent for everyone, including the government. The government is being cautious, and when you have to be so cautious, it is difficult to get things done."

© THE STRAITS TIMES (SINGAPORE). ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRINTED BY ARRANGEMENT WITH ASIA NEWS NETWORK.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Saving Islam?

Islam is known as the religion of peace. We have known from different Hadiths that our beloved Prophet (pbuh) forgave all his enemies after Mecca had been conquered by Muslims. The non-Muslims of his time were motivated by his kind behaviour and consequently they accepted Islam as their religion. No blasphemy law was needed at the time. But Hefajat-e-Islam activists seem to be walking in the opposite direction. Is Islam really in danger in this country where the majority of people are Muslims?
Rafikul Islam, BAU, Mymensingh

Outrageous!

The Savar tragedy is the deadliest man-made disaster Bangladesh has ever faced. But seeing the brave rescuers we got the feeling that Bangladeshis are always ready to protect their fellow countrymen even by risking their own lives. However, there have been some reports on television that a few corrupt people have taken compensation from the government claiming that they were the families of the victims. This is outrageous. These culprits should be punished. At a time when sympathy and help are what the victims' families deserve to get, it is disheartening to know that there are still many amongst us who act from their own selfish motives.
Samiha Matin, Uttara, Dhaka

An objectionable picture

I am writing this letter after seeing a picture published on the back page of your newspaper on 1st May 2013. The picture of two hapless human beings clinging to each other under the rubble of the collapsed building was too much to take. I was wondering what the newspaper authorities were thinking when they published this picture.

One should realise that these bodies were of people who probably had brothers and sisters, friends, spouses, children and other family members. It must have been very unpleasant for them to see the picture and the caption.

We want to see true and detailed news reports, but in a more sensitive way.
Asfarul Islam, Architect, Dhaka

Journalism for truth

Journalists' duty is to tell people the truth fearlessly. But we really get shocked when we see two different reports of the same incident in two different newspapers. We don't want yellow journalism. People want to know the truth from journalists.
Snawara Shimul, Dhaka University

Govt decision and people's sufferings

We are really surprised to know that our government refused to accept help from foreign countries in the rescue operation at Rana Plaza. The government should have sought help from foreign countries to rescue the people who were buried under the rubble of the collapsed building. It is our firm belief that many more people could have been saved if foreign countries were allowed to help.

We just cannot understand why the government did not take the foreign rescue teams' help. They had all the equipment and skills needed for conducting a proper rescue operation. The government's equipment was not enough to carry out this huge rescue operation. We saw on television that the volunteers, army and fire brigade men requested the general people continuously to provide them with saws, oxygen cylinders, drill machines, torches, surgical masks, water bottles and many other things.

How unfortunate we are! We have to suffer because of the government's wrong decisions.
Nur Jahan, Chittagong

Comments on news analysis, "Shapla Chattar & act of Houdini," published on May 8, 2013

Mo Chaudhury

What is the point of this analysis? Does it mean that not enough lives were lost? Whether they were protesters or law enforcement officials or innocent onlookers, they are lost forever.

Julfikar

Thank you, Daily Star, for publishing this timely piece of news analysis. I was astonished to see BNP's naked use of propaganda. Even they did not feel ashamed to allege that some 'Debashish' has burned down thousands of Holy Quran.

Nds

It is really saddening that such blatant lies are being deliberately spread by a group of people claiming to uphold the religious values and sentiment.

1 Man Army

I reside in a nearby area and I know what happened, at least more than what you know. There might be fabricated photos on social media but it is also true that many Hefazat activists were killed that night.

mass_effect

It is unfortunate that many amongst us are knowingly propagating and spreading this lie. Being anti-government is one thing and deliberately spreading lies is another.

Isha

It is heartless to see people talking about numbers as if it is numbers which matter. Every single life matters, every single person who died had a life ahead of him. What was the harm in letting them stay there till dawn? Why did the police have to carry out the operation in complete darkness?

Reazuddin

This article is biased, partisan and fabricated. The story was framed desperately to save this government and its misdeeds. I was dismayed to observe the twist of truth and dishonest attempts to save the wrongdoings of the authorities.