

US praising our anti-terror stance

But why pressurise Obama to withdraw special trade status?

THE US State Department in its country report on terrorism has praised the Bangladesh government for 'its commitment to combating domestic and trans-national terrorist groups'. The report further maintains 'its counterterrorism efforts made it harder for trans-national terrorists to operate in or establish safe havens in Bangladesh'. As a secular state, Bangladesh has for some years now been at the forefront of combating extremism which could otherwise have posed a serious destabilising challenge to the country and the region as a whole.

Indeed, trans-national and trans-regional cooperation on combating terrorism have brought the government due praise. The country is signatory to major security protocols and has taken measures to limit potential threats on its territory that include introduction of science curricula to the madrasa system of education; engaging religious leaders like Imams in the fight against terrorism.

Yet while the US praises Bangladesh on the one hand on security issues; we are perplexed to see labour rights proponents in the US pressurising Obama administration to take away special trade status hitherto granted to Bangladesh. Rather than doing this, engaging Bangladesh in the reform process to provide adequate safeguards for labour rights is the way to go about it. At the end of the day, working out differences over the negotiating table would prove to be mutually beneficial. After all, it is only in the interests of regional and global security that the present climate of cooperation be preserved and improved between Bangladesh and the US.

Not just profit

Ethical practices go a long way

THE Daily Star and DHL have jointly honoured this year's business heroes of Bangladesh, in their 13th Business Awards event. Two individuals and two enterprises received laurels for their achievement and excellence which leave examples for many a future entrepreneur to emulate.

Nasiruddin Biswas and Masuda Islam were the two individuals honored for their individual successes which are linked to the livelihoods of many in this country. Mr. Biswas created 23,000 jobs through his nine industries and Ms Islam, a former school teacher, has created 26, leading Protina BD foods.

IDLC Finance and DBL group also won awards as enterprises, not only for creating jobs and adding values for their consumers but for best ethical practices.

There is much to learn from these individuals and companies for the rest of us out there creating business ventures. It is always tempting to take the easy route of rising to the top and making profit without thinking deeply about the consequences of corrupted or narrow-minded practices and their effect on the general population. But for sustainable growth of the economic sector of Bangladesh, it is highly important that businesses and entrepreneurs have ethical practices in mind with the desire to create more livelihoods for the nation of 150 million.

Whether one receives an award or not, we hope all businesses take inspiration from these four outstanding institutions and pave the path for a economically brighter and transparent future.

Food laws in school

FAHMIDA HASHEM

RECENT data suggests that almost 20 percent of elementary school children nationwide are obese. Research shows that on any given day, 16 million children receive unhealthy snacks or beverages at school, amounting to 400 billion calories of low-nutrient, or "junk" food, sold in public schools annually.

When children are taught in the classroom about good nutrition and the value of choosing healthy food, they are surrounded by vending machines, snack bars, school stores and sales offering low nutrient density options. The children thus receive the message that 'good nutrition is merely an academic exercise.' Health and children's advocates believe that this is sending kids confusing signals about which food to choose.

The known 'competitive food laws' regulate the foods that can be sold at schools outside the school meal programs in an attempt to reduce childhood obesity. But implementation of the law is very weak. It just speaks of healthy foods, but does not set any standard of nutrition.

Government efforts should include "comprehensive action" involving parents and schools. As part of the program, the government should also promote healthy foods such as milk, juice and fruits in academic premises.

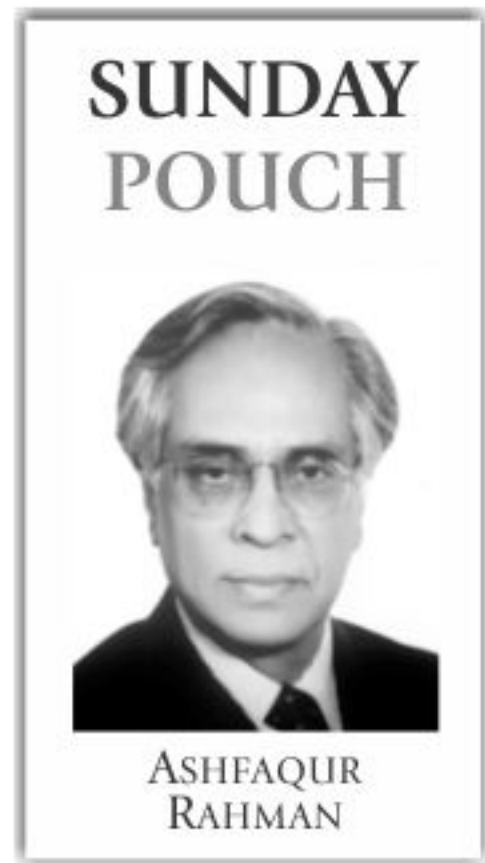
Let the kids vote on healthy snacks they think taste the best. A 'food fair' would motivate parents and students get involved. The fair could be set up like a 'science fair' where students show the benefits of healthy foods vs. junk foods; at kiosks the children build to display their researched projects, the school can locate and distribute coupons for healthy snacks for parent purchase.

The laws were aimed at restricting the food and drinks sold in public school vending machines and school stores, outside of mealtime. Personal responsibility for maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle is also important.

We want a society that does not try to influence kids into brand faithfulness, but one that encourages, supports and creates a space for our next generation to be the most creative, critical thinking and healthy people they can be.

The writer is from the Department of Food and Nutrition, University of Dhaka.

Playing *hadodo* with politics!



As things stand today, the major parties are agreeable to holding talks but each has provisos. Yet the parties concede that talks have to take place to have a peaceful and fair election. So can we assume that the parties are merely posturing?



A game like *hadodo* is being played out on our political turf for some time now. The 14 party coalitions, which is led by the Awami League (AL) and which is now the government, continue to huddle the players of the 18 party opposition led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Each group is desperately trying to outwit the other by a touch or a grip or a knot in order to claim the turf. Yet none of them have scored any significant number of points. But the watch is ticking away and the game must end soon.

Of late there are faint signs that the leaders of both groups may come together to talk on issues that bedevil them and the nation. The signs are however so feeble that many dismiss them as mere conjecture. But it must be remembered that even though both the groups are huffing and puffing and challenging each other, but they both know that they must at some stage sit down to resolve issues. Although they threaten that the issues will ultimately be sorted out in the street yet they know that extra constitutional forces may step in with disastrous results for both and for the nation.

It is well accepted that in a democratic dispensation, a free and fair election, is the way to allow continuity in governance under that system. So politicians of all colors and hue need elections. To them elections provide the needed oxygen to survive and pulsate. So what are the signs that one can deduce that the parties may be sitting down to talks, if not already doing so, away from public view? To start, the AL has invited the opposition to unconditional talks at anytime and at any place. It has an open ended agenda but nothing can be discussed if they do not fall within the purview of our constitution. By stating this it want to put on record that it is unwilling to discuss the matter of reinstalling a caretaker government to oversee the next general elections.

The opposition BNP however does not want to confine its agenda within the perimeters of what the AL has stated. It is willing to talk about any-

thing that relates to the holding of the next elections. But since it fears that the elections under the stewardship of the AL may not be free and fair, it wants that it may be held under a non-political caretaker government. The AL in fact has no difficulty in an interim government during the elections, but it wants that such a government must be run by a group of elected representatives of the people who are now parliament members. The head of that government must be the present Prime Minister with much reduced responsibilities and power.

The opposition BNP has also expressed its concern about the inappropriate political atmosphere for talks. Many of its important leaders are now inside the jail, ostensibly on non-political grounds. During any talks it will not be able to consult them and seek their guidance at will. The BNP also resents the fact that the government has banned all political meetings and rallies for a month in the capital Dhaka under the pretext of carrying out relief work. This would preclude them from having talks about the talks. In reply the AL has raised the issue of calling frequent *hartals* by the opposition and their alleged resorting to violence to enforce these *hartals*.

As things stand today, the major parties are agreeable to holding talks but each has provisos. Yet the parties concede that talks have to take place to have a peaceful and fair election. So can we assume that the parties are merely posturing? The Parliament will be seating for debating the country's budget. This time the opposition BNP will be attending the opening session just to perhaps regularise their membership, as any member not joining the Parliament sessions for 90 days at a stretch lose his/her assembly seat. But are they likely to tarry longer? If they do, then it will give them an opportunity to see whether the government is taking any initiative to start the talks and whether it is allowing the opposition to state their position on the floor of the house.

The AL has overwhelming majority

in the Parliament. It is for it to take the first step forward. The new Speaker has already offered her good office to facilitate the holding of the talks if it is within the confines of the house. But to be fair, the AL has to ensure a congenial political atmosphere for the talks to begin. It must release opposition leaders who are still behind bars and both sides must restrain its party members from any act that may vitiate the healthy political atmosphere.

It is well known that when opposing groups are faced with a large task, they can manage it by breaking down the problem into manageable parts. This is how you eat a chocolate elephant. The answer is 'one bite at a time.' You deal with one aspect at a time. You resort to what is known as bounded rationality. This is because we have limitations of the human mind and because of the structure within which the mind works.

If the talks do take place, the AL should make the first steps particularly easy. It should offer more than take. The people must be kept focused on the next steps. Before long the AL will have climbed the mountain. As the Greek poet Horace had said, 'He has half the deed done who has made a beginning.'

The talks must lead each side to present evidence that supports the need for change. The side that produces incontrovertible evidence that stares you in the face, it becomes difficult to put your head in the sand and wish it away. Cold, hard evidence is a good way of changing minds.

Finally, both sides needs to create a motivating vision of the future. This should be done by a small team to discuss what is needed which leads to a program of change which will improve things significantly.

So the talks if they succeed could lead to an immediate closure of our politics of violence. It could gift the nation with a peaceful and free election. So why not stop playing *hadodo* and start playing politics for the welfare of the people?

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Secularism vs nationalism and communalism

ALAMGIR KHAN

THE Daily Star on its May 30 issue reported of a communal attack upon a 150-year-old Kuleswari temple at Hossainpur upazila of Kishoreganj. Its Editorial urged the government to 'act decisively', and said, 'The government cannot any more just watch; while the scandalous attacks against religious minorities continue.' The words can only mean that the government just keeps watching and does not act decisively and it doubts whether we can 'be called a civilised society' while it continues. Why does it continue, after all, in the independent Bangladesh?

Bangladesh aspired to be a socialist country after it gained independence, but there was no favourable condition or competent leadership for it. The liberation war of Bangladesh was not a war of Bengali nationalists though Bengali nationalism was the dominating force behind it; it was a war of all nationalities living in the then East Pakistan. Bengali nationalism did not work in 1905 and 1947; then the splitting force of religion seemed to be stronger than the uniting force of nationalism. Again, the splitting force of language proved to be stronger than the unifying force of religion in 1971. Ahmed Sofa refuted the projection of the liberation war as a rectification of the two-nation theory on the basis of which Pakistan was born. To Ahmed Sofa, it was more than that. [Bangladeshe Rajnoitik Jotilata, 1977]. Therefore, 1971 was not to go back to pre-1947; it was to go farther than that. This one step forward was the aspiration of the working people of Bangladesh for equality and justice, who are the chief architects of this independent country (Ahmed Sofa, Buddhibrutir Notun Binyas, 1972). This was on the basis of secularism which is a higher philosophy than narrow nationalism. Later, for the sake of going two steps back, Bengali nationalism was sneaked into the constitution by the people who had been elected to prepare a constitution for Pakistan. By gripping the hand of Bengali nationalism, first came Bangladeshi nationalism then a state religion in the constitution.

This has served the interests of



Century old idols of a Krishna temple at Kuleshwari Bari lay in ruins after criminals attacked the temple.

Awami League, BNP, Jatiya Party, Jamaat -- every party in Bangladesh. When Hindus, Buddhists, adivasis and other minority peoples are threatened, harassed and attacked in Bangladesh all these parties and party leaders get busy in pointing their fingers to one another without taking a practical step of protecting them. Time passes away in the game of pointing fingers, yet the culprits who are a few in numbers can never be caught red-handed. Why don't you catch a single culprit and put him on show and say which camp he belongs to? Why can't even the ruling party with all the state force at its disposal do it? Why, an opposition party whose cadres have been notorious in beating and killing some policemen in the country in front of TV cameras can't put a single scratch on the body of a culprit bent on the barbaric act of attacking people of other faiths, ransacking their property and desecrating their gods? Why doesn't a single member of the heroic police force who can enter an opposition party's head-office and ransack it, who can size up former powerful ministers on the road, can lathi-charge a peaceful procession, and some of whom get mutilated and even killed in keeping peace in the stadium of politics, receive a single scratch when the lives, properties and gods of people of other faiths are at stake? It seems that when the question of protecting the minority people comes up, every one of the parties mentioned above are more helpless and need more protection than the victims.

Philosopher John Stuart Mill put forward a reason about why and how a state is formed in human society. He wrote in his essay On Liberty, 'To prevent the weaker members of the community from being preyed upon by innumerable vultures, it was needful that there should be an animal of prey stronger than the rest, commissioned to keep them down. But as the king of the vultures would be no less bent upon preying upon the flock than any of the minor harpies, it was indispensable to be in a perpetual attitude of defence against his beak and claws.'

What happens if a state force is not stronger than the vultures preying upon weaker members in a state? It was Ramu last year. This year it is Hindus with 71 of their temples and 1,500 houses burnt down and looted away in 32 districts. [Prothom Alo, 25 March 2013]. After 154 years of J. S. Mill's remark about the role of a state and the civil society, Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Chairman of Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh, deplored that both the state and the civil society of Bangladesh have utterly failed to protect the interests of the minority people in this country. [Prothom Alo, 29 March 2013]. Have we made any progress or gone backwards with the lack of a stronger force to protect the weaker members and the lack of any arrangement to protect ourselves against the beak and claws of the king of vultures?

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Admission tests at Notre Dame College

A report published in Samakal on May 26 has drawn my attention. The news says the Notre Dame College authorities requested the education ministry to allow them to hold admission tests, but the ministry's answer was in the negative. Notre Dame College has some special rules. If admission tests are held, then the meritorious students who failed to attain good results in the SSC exams will get a chance to compete to get admitted to this college. I hope the government will consider the matter and allow them to hold admission tests.

Jannatul Ferdous Usha
Nalitabari, Sherpur

Politicisation of crime

In our society backsliding is rampant. Criminals go scot-free exploiting the legal loopholes. They, who are a few in number, commit the same crimes over and over again. Politicisation of crime has plagued the whole society. As they always go unpunished, they dare to shrug off the laws. To stop this, we should not only give lip-service, but also work hard to establish the rule of law.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
ASP (Sadar Circle)
Moulvibazar

Correct political vocabulary

It is encouraging to see so many youth participating in spelling bees. My plea to you, young geniuses, is to help your politicians with their vocabulary! With that in mind let us help them define two words, "genocide" and "nepotism." Since you spelling champions are likely internet wizards also, what does a simple Google search reveal? "Genocide" is "the deliberate killing of a large group of people, esp. those of a particular ethnic group or nation." Examples could include what Hitler did to 6 million Jews in World War II and what the Pakistanis and their accomplices did to 3 million Bangladeshis towards the end of the Liberation War.

"Nepotism" according to Wikipedia is "favouritism granted to relatives regardless of merit." Can you bright geniuses think of any current examples of this?

Scott Elliott
Uttara, Dhaka

Reduce cost of internet use

Millions of people in Bangladesh use Facebook and other social networking sites every day. But the cost of internet is extremely high. Mobile operators and other internet service providers have been making huge profits with their various internet packages. There are many hidden conditions also. We want the government to take a timely decision about reducing internet cost. We demand per gigabyte data be priced at Tk. 50 with a good browsing and downloading speed.

Samiul Raijul
Bangladesh University of Textiles
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Go for safer model," published on May 31, 2013

Triple Ace
How reliable are Bangladeshi scientists?

M. Ashraf
This is a misadventure for Bangladesh. Where will all the wastes go? What containment radius will this power station have? Why put fire into such feeble hands and risk our future? The politicians will not care with their children living overseas, but what will happen to others? Deformed children are still being born in Russia and Japan.

Raihan Al-Beruni
VVER-1200 is better. It is safer and lasts 50 years.

Iftekhar Hassan Raihan
But it will not be safe forever.

Raf Chow
'Percentage' of billions in construction and then upkeep -- wow! A cash cow for the corrupt. Who cares about any fallout or accidents!

"BNP's demand illogical" (May 31, 2013)

Mofi
I really do not understand the benefit of what PM said "democracy continues...and no unelected people could assume state power." It could be a benefit for PM and other politicians, the chairs of the government will remain occupied by them.

Ash C.
She can say anything in her favour after consolidating the gain by using her parliamentary privilege. She should listen to the voice of the people who want an election under a non-partisan government to avoid the impending catastrophe.