

The Eid epitomises brotherhood

Let the warmth cross all barriers

MARKING the end of Ramadan, the month of self-restraint and abstinence, Muslims will break fast, pray and join the festivities of Eidul Fitr, on the first day of the lunar month of Shawal. Muslims of Bangladesh as elsewhere in the world will observe this day and share their joys equally with everyone.

The preparations for the Eid are no less exciting than its actual observance amid fun and festivities. That includes Eid shopping for new dresses, food items and different kinds of gifts for family members, especially the children, as well as relatives and neighbours. So, traders in various merchandises have been looking forward to this day for brisk business.

With most of the city dwellers' roots entrenched in rural Bangladesh, homeward rush of the Eid holidaymakers provides the passenger transport companies with a huge business opportunity. But as during the previous occasions, this time, too, the Eid holidaymakers had to pay through the nose to get tickets for trains, buses and launches. This profiteering motive of traders mars the joy and the spirit of brotherhood to some extent. Businesses should try to uphold the true significance of Eid and demonstrate social commitment in their business practices. And let it not be a one-day affair.

Muslims will embrace one another forgetting all their differences and ill-feelings in the correct spirit of universal brotherhood.

In Bangladesh, we hope the ambience of union and brotherhood that Eid brings with it will spread its warmth across political barriers causing the relations between major political parties to thaw.

A very happy Eid to our readers and patrons.

Excitement over HSC results tapering

Battle for admission is on

AS with every year, this year's HSC examinees will be battling it out to find a seat in one of the more prestigious universities in the country. The situation is not helped by the paucity of seats with nearly 300,000 candidates securing GPA-4 and above. They are jostling to get a place in one of the 55 public and private universities and 53 private medical and 9 dental colleges offering a net total of 8,500 seats in all. What is ironical in this overall scenario is the lack of interest of the bulk of good students to enrol in the estimated 500 colleges under National University located in rural areas, primarily due to poor quality of education and following outdated curricula.

With the ministry of education toying with introduction of a uniform admission test at all universities under a "cluster system" which would allow for students' admission based on results, this year's candidates will have to follow the old system. That means this year two students will be rushing to coaching centres expending large sums of money which most parents would be happy not to part with. Not only is it a question of expenses, many prestigious universities examination dates clash with one another which adds further salt to injury as a prospective candidate's chances of admission turn slimmer.

To our mind, results of previous exams combined with the performance in the admission test should form a rational criterion for admission to higher studies.

Eideconomics

DR. MUHAMMAD ABDUL MAZID

EID ul-Fitr, one of the major festivals in Bangladesh marks the end of Ramadan. The social meaning of Eid is joyful festival, while its etymological meaning denotes returning repeatedly.

The Eid ul-Fitr effect exists around the festivity, has an impact in the socio economic arena. Markets for clothes, footwear, cosmetics, jewelry and electronic gadgets witness bumper sales hovering around hundreds of billion taka ahead of Eid. Commercial banks witness a heavy rush for money transaction as a huge number of clients withdraw from and deposit cash in the banks only few days ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr. The commercial banks, which face liquidity shortage, borrow from the call money market to tackle the rush. Banks and non-bank financial institutions made a record of transaction on the call money market alone ahead of Eid ul Fitr by borrowing collectively Tk 8,218 crore from the market in a day. Bangladesh Bank has had to pump a record amount of money into the banking system as clients flooded almost all the branches of banks across the country before the start of Eid vacation. On a single day last year the banks wanted to borrow Tk 14,258 crore through special Repo but the central bank gave them Tk 9,878 crore and provided Tk 6,644.37 crore as liquidity support. Given that the majority of Muslim businessmen spend a substantial amount of cash for the festival remittances poured into Bangladesh economy. A special business spree starts for transportation sector as large number of people travel to their village homes.

Festivals are common to all societies and cultures. Although most of the festivals were related to religions, these did not evolve on account of religions -- they originated spontaneously in the society. Later on, they assumed more formal character. As for example, not very long ago, singing and music, Khatak dance, kite flying, horse race, boat race was a part of the Eid festival of the Muslims of Bengal, which was an expression of spontaneity. Now it is not there.

However, the Eid festival is so deeply rooted in the social organism that they continue to entertain people from generation to generation. It also bears the mark of the community and nation, has the stamp of religion, and again bears the impress of politics.

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Readjusting India policy

STRATEGICALLY
SPEAKING



Brig Gen
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The FM sees the matter as otherwise. The argument that the issues have at least been taken up for consideration by the AL government, not done heretofore, is achievements of sorts has merit, but when contrasted with the fact that we did not play our diplomatic cards right in using the other bilateral issues to our advantage, the final outcome is really nil. And not surprisingly, she sees it also from an exclusive partisan prism -- the non-resolution of the issue influencing the outcome of the next parliamentary election.

The Bangladesh High Commissioner to India made a virtue out of the unsuccessful visit suggesting that it was a private visit and therefore the question of "success" or "unsuccess" did not arise.

The optimists do not see this as the be all and end all of the Bangladesh-India relations, while the pessimists/realists feel that these issues are going to affect the future course of bilateral relationship. The question is whether the AL government will feel obliged to reevaluate and readjust its India policy. If a recent poll in India showed that Indians trust Bangladesh, one need not be a Nostradamus to predict the result if a similar poll were to be held in Bangladesh regarding how Bangladeshis felt about India's reliability.

It needs restating that Bangladesh foreign policy has not only been Indo-centric, it has been predominated by India where our main efforts have been to devise ways and means to live and survive with India around our three sides. Regrettably, the bilateral relationship has been regime-centric which has prevented the formulation of a coherent India policy cutting across party line.

IF our foreign minister had thought that she would be able to make headway with the two most important bilateral issues between Bangladesh and India, the land boundary agreement and the Teesta deal, during her Delhi visit, I am afraid she must have become temporarily oblivious of the term realpolitik. I hope she would realise that no country runs its foreign policy on ethical considerations, except perhaps Bangladesh.

We share her dismay and frustration at what can at best be described as an unsuccessful India policy of this government.

Successful foreign policy is a force multiplier for the nation since it furthers ones national interest. One wonders whether that is the case in respect of Bangladesh policy vis a vis India.

However, there is much to learn from Dipu Moni's unsuccessful trip.

Firstly, resolution of Bangladesh-India bilateral issues have come to be heavily dependent on the dynamics of India's internal politics, where a government without required majority in the parliament will be unable to carry through its international commitments.

Secondly, it has been made amply clear, at least in the case of Bangladesh, that it shall have to deal with not only the government in the centre in India but also the major political parties and some state governments. Our question is should that be the case? And in that context calling at the door of the other political parties by our foreign minister was not called for. As for the land boundary agreement, the BJP has said that it will not support it in the parliament.

Thirdly, national interest dominates all other considerations. For India, personal equation at leadership level does not necessarily add speed to the process of resolution of bilateral issues, and in spite of the 'Hilsha' and 'Jamdani' diplomacy the Indian opposition is a definite quantity which has to be taken in to consideration by the Indian government.

Fourthly, we act on the promise of our neighbour, India acts on the reality on ground where public opinion matters. We showed our magnanimity by conceding many of India's demands even to the extent of causing inconvenience to ourselves, and damaging our own infrastructure. We allowed passage of oversized containers virtually free, despite public criticism. Only a few months ago, a shipment of rice from western part of India to the east across our land territory was allowed free of cost on the pretext that it was done on humanitarian grounds. One was not aware of any humanitarian situation obtaining in the Indian northeast at that time.

Recently, the FM talked about the many gains in the diplomatic front after she came under media criticism for her expensive foreign tours without substantive outcome. But if ever the foreign ministry were to bring out a booklet on its achievements of the last five years one would be extremely hard put to include these two issues on the list of successes.

Successful foreign policy is a force multiplier for the nation since it furthers ones national interest. One wonders whether that is the case in respect of Bangladesh policy vis a vis India.

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The India-US deal that hasn't worked

SALMAN HAIDAR

IT is not so long since the India-US nuclear deal ushered in a new era in relations between the two countries. The edginess that had so often intruded seemed to have been definitively set aside, to be replaced by a genuine spirit of goodwill and cooperation. The nuclear issue had been the most prominent among the differences between the two countries, a seemingly impermeable barrier between them.

The US felt obliged to impose sanctions on many types of nuclear-related transactions between the two countries, which of course placed a limitation on their mutual confidence and readiness to do any sort of business together. The nuclear deal was expected to change that. Fingerprinting and recrimination were to be replaced by an active search for cooperative endeavour.

Lifting of sanctions would open a vast new field for commercial exchanges in hi-tech products, especially for the nuclear power industry. And the important driver for this newly-affirmed friendship was the strategic convergence that the leaders of the two countries discerned and were keen to promote. These were the two largest democracies in the world, natural partners, with a shared strategic vision that tended to set them apart from the autocracies proliferating elsewhere on the globe.

With such large and expansive prospects, the deal represented a basic change of orientation with far-reaching implications for the principals and also for the emerging global architecture. It generated real expectation and was rightly regarded as the most significant foreign policy initiative of the first United Progressive Alliance government.

It did not work quite as had been wished for. The euphoria of the agreement began to fade not long after it was signed, as the difficulties of putting it into implementation became more evident. Numerous matters of detail had to be settled before concrete attempts could be made to negotiate contracts for the supply of nuclear equipment, even though the bilateral deal had opened the doors and there were plenty of suppliers abroad and potential users in India to encourage expectations of early progress.

Moreover, from the point of view of the interested parties a major unwelcome roadblock unexpectedly materialised when India's Parliament laid down certain conditions for contracts of the type envisaged under the freshly negotiated deal. Drawing lessons from the tragedy of Bhopal when India was woefully unprepared to obtain adequate compensation for the colossal losses inflicted by a foreign multinational, the parliament was determined that such a situation should never recur.

Hence conditions were laid down by the legislators to ensure that the suppliers should remain liable for the proper functioning of the equipment they supplied for an extended period of time, to ensure the protection of all those who might be affected by a malfunction.

Potential suppliers have found it difficult to meet the required conditions, and as a result what was expected to be an immediate benefit from the nuclear deal has not yet materialised and a major building block of the refreshed India-US relationship is yet to take proper shape.

Despite such issues, the ties between the two countries have maintained an upward trend over the last several years. Among other things, the US has become a significant supplier of defence equipment: only a few days ago the IAF received a boost with the induction of another large transport aircraft from a US supplier. There have been other comparable transactions and more can be expected.

Such deals require high-level clearance in the two capitals and bespeak a good deal of mutual confidence. But if a new window has been opened for military supplies and for

other government-to-government transactions, new problems have cropped up elsewhere.

These have been prominently in the public eye and have tended to generate a certain amount of acrimony.

For India the matter of visas to permit Indian professionals in the IT field to work and live in the US has become a big issue.

Progressive tightening of the rules has meant that there is considerable uncertainty among Indian managers about the future, leading to concerns that there could be a real setback to what has become the most prominent Indian commercial activity in the US.

Hence the grumbling in India is on the increase and repeated efforts have been made to persuade the US to be more responsive to India's needs, to little avail.

The US has its own grievances. Its corporations and trading companies complain about the difficulties of doing business in India.

They feel that India tends to discriminate against them, though India, no less than the US does not accept that its rules, which apply to all comers, are drawn up to restrain the other. Pharmaceutical firms are especially vocal in seeking easier trading conditions. In recent years, India has been active in producing and disseminating generic versions of some life-saving drugs, notably those used in the fight against AIDS in Third World countries where affected populations cannot afford the high cost of drugs manufactured in the West. To an extent, friction on such issues can be regarded as unavoidable owing to the vast increase in commercial contact.

Annual trade is now in the region of \$100 billion, which means that many more players are now in the field with specific interests that need to be taken into account. The two governments are well aware of these realities and have done much to address them, witness the proliferating bilateral groups of officials and experts who meet constantly to address such problems -- and that in itself is an innovation, if one contrasts the very limited official contact between New Delhi and Washington of past days. Furthermore, high-level visits have also taken place to maintain momentum, most recently that of Vice President Biden, and not long before that a trio of top Indian economic managers visited the US.

These exchanges have served a purpose and there have been some useful responses to the current difficulties but the shadows have not yet been dispelled.

Nor can economic and managerial issues be seen in isolation from others, for lack of harmony in some matters can affect mutual confidence in others, including the strategic convergence that they have achieved on several global issues. They both continue to need each other for mutual economic advantage and for mutual support in a difficult phase of international and regional developments -- one has only to look at the situation in Afghanistan to see how far their interests intersect. It is thus necessary to strengthen the effort to strengthen and restore bilateral cooperation.

Fortunately, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is expected to visit the US before long. This will be an opportunity for ironing out the wrinkles that have appeared recently and ensuring that India-US ties remain dynamic and globally important. It was Singh who reshaped bilateral ties by steering through the nuclear deal and he is best placed to give needed momentum to the relationship.

The writer is India's former foreign secretary.
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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Refrain from violent politics

After a long month of fasting, Muslims in Bangladesh are ready to celebrate the Eid-ul-fitr. But the opposition political parties are threatening the government of starting an extreme political movement after Eid. We want peace and happiness and do not expect any turmoil in the country. So we urge the opposition to refrain from the path of destruction for the welfare of the country.

Misbah Uddin Sumon

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Who bankrolls political parties?

On 1st August, almost all English dailies reported on last year's audited financial figures of the major political parties. The figures showed that the party in power, AL, naturally has the highest income of Tk.10 crore, while the main opposition BNP has the lowest: Tk. 1.79 crore. Surprisingly, Jamaat's income is 6.04 crore! JP also had a good collection of 4.81 crore. Probably many rich persons, who earlier contributed for BNP, have shifted to the party now in power, for obvious reasons!

However, except AL, all other parties showed cash deficits. What puzzles me is, who finances these sizable deficits? If it is commercial banks, then we should know which banks finance these political parties that have no tangible fixed assets against which overdrafts are usually allowed. We should keep away from such banks.

Critical voter

One-mail

A letter to Michelle

Obama

I must appreciate your sincere initiatives towards ensuring welfare of the common Americans particularly of the middle-class together with your husband President Barack Obama. I take keen interest in your work and plan and regularly read your letters sent through the "Obama for America." In the most recent letter you have talked about the welfare of the middle-class.

In this connection, I would like to draw your kind attention to our society where the middle-class and the lower-middle-class people are struggling hard to survive in jobs with meagre pay. A great number of people mainly women are working in the garment sector. But unfortunately, the US has suspended GSP facility which has pushed the future of our garment industry into uncertainty. I would like to request your good office as the US first lady to please take an initiative to withdraw the suspension of GSP facility for Bangladesh.

Professor M Zahidul Haque

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Comments on news report, "City billboards hijacked by AL," published on August 6, 2013

Nds

I am certain that this foolish move will prove to be suicidal for AL. It really surprises me how a political party having longstanding experience can make such blunders as to assume that public will fail to distinguish between publicity and propaganda.

WD

I don't think any of our politicians from either party has any dignity left.

Max

Billboard owners declined to comment on this due to fear of reprisals. Is this a democratic government or a mafia state?

Suman Gazi

That reminds me of the film 'Hirok Rajar Deshe!'

Saleh Tanveer

Arbitrary decision to put up these billboards without respecting any rules and procedures is much more than advertisement; it is a demonstration of AL's misuse of power. I think they can barely hope to gain anything through shiny glitzy images.

Sayed Khondoker

If Awami League is spending their own money to put up the billboards, then no one should care. But if the taxpayers' money is being used, then they are violating the election rules as well as committing crime.

"Rescuers slip into abyss" (August 5, 2013)

Subir Das

They did what the government was supposed to do - save lives from under Rana Plaza rubble. Now we should do what the government is supposed to do -- help them to relieve from mental trauma.

Talat

They were civilians who have never been exposed to such a traumatic situation. This certainly has made a deep scar on their psyche. The government with the financial help from the garment industry should provide support to these victims suffering from severe mental trauma.