

## Avoid a face-off

### Ease public tension

ALTHOUGH the DMP has banned rally, processions and human chain beginning this morning, public mind continues to be weighed down by the prospect of an impending showdown between the two major alliances which could turn violent if the AL and BNP did not get off their high horse. This is all the more so in view of the prime minister's overtures to the opposition, which deals with at least one pre-election dispensation, to tide over the current political impasse.

Admittedly, many things remain to be clarified by the government regarding the PM's offer, and the offer may not have met the expectations of the opposition and indeed a large segment of the public, who may feel that the PM has not gone far enough. But we believe that at least it can be the starting point of a more substantive and meaningful dialogue that would address the opposition's apprehension about the conduct of the next parliamentary elections as well the constitutional caveats.

We have not as yet got the reaction of the BNP till going to press but the fact that the BNP has not dismissed it out of hand, like Jamaat, is matter of comfort.

The AL's earlier announcement of a counter programme on 25 October had compounded the matter that had already held ominous prospects with a BNP leader calling on his party workers to come armed with spears and machetes. The least the two parties can do to assuage the public mind is to avoid a face-off.

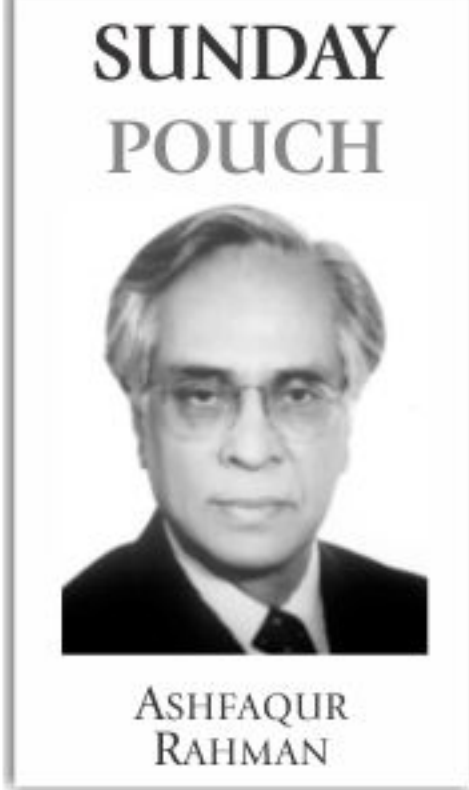
## Slavery in our times

### A huge shame

THE Global Slavery Index 2013 surely makes dismal reading. That in this day and age there are countries where slavery, in its modern manifestations, continues to flourish runs counter to notions of transparent and accountable government as well as global connectivity. The hard fact, as the index covering as many as 162 countries makes clear, is that a number of factors, especially in terms of population concentration as well as diffusion, instances of child marriage and human trafficking, are there in a perpetuation of such slavery.

The GSI apart, there are before us the many instances of how people across large parts of the world have been compelled into a slave-like existence through sheer poverty. One could cite here the tens of thousands of migrant workers who travel from different countries to the Middle East, where they easily fall prey to depredations of many kinds. There are the many stories of maids --- from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Philippines --- who have been subjected to torture by their employers abroad. Within Bangladesh, there are ultra poor families where children have been compelled to follow in their parents' footsteps in the difficult labour of earning a living through working generationally for more prosperous households.

Poverty is not yet history nor will likely be. But what could happen is for more awareness on the part of societies and governments to grow in order for a decent social order to emerge across the globe. It is painful to be told that slavery is part of life for large numbers of people in India, China and Pakistan. It is, for us in Bangladesh, a shame that we are among the 76 per cent, or 29.8 million people, engaged in



political caretaker government to supervise the polls. The PM called the caretaker government a 'proverbial mill-stone' which had been hanging around Bangladesh's neck.

This initiative by the PM has put the BNP in a dilemma. Will it abandon the caretaker issue or press it on the street? If it does so is it willing to pay the heavy price that it has to give in terms of lives, limbs and property. For the government will not bend easily to this demand as the caretaker system is no more enshrined in our constitution. The PM is likely to use the full force of the state to make the opposition bend to the will of the constitution.

But let us also be clear. The PM by her announcement has opened the door to political negotiations among political parties inside the parliament. Will the BNP and the Jamaat consider negotiating on an interim government? In a knee-jerk reaction the BNP had already said that there is nothing new in the PM's proposal.

Some political analysts opine that the PM has initiated the proposals to counter BNP's promised actions on the streets from October 24, when the parliament is expected to end its given term. But there is more to it than just this.

The government overture was to send a strong signal to serious political elements that despite what BNP states the PM is serious that political discussions can now take place. The question of who will lead the interim government has been left open for a negotiated settlement. The matter of when the interim government will start operating, what would be the total number of members that would form the poll time government are political gaps that need to be filled after all-party negotiations.

The details about the functions of the interim government can also be determined through discussions across the table. So the PM has given an agenda to the parliament members to see things and decide upon. The interesting part is that the government has only indicated by what last date the elections must be held, but has not put the interim government in a bind on resolving each of these issues. Our astute politicians must use their political sagacity, common sense and good intentions to achieve the interim government.

However, a major challenge before the members of parliament will be who will head the interim government? Although the PM has not expressly said that she would be the one, her party thinks that she would be the one to hold that position. That can cause the opposition groups to be

## Our political dilemma!

LAST Friday, our prime minister, in an address to the nation, proposed an all-party interim government to supervise the forthcoming 10th national elections. She called all political parties, specially the main opposition the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), to select their representatives and name them for joining the interim government. By proposing this, she rejected what the BNP has been crying hoarse over the past years, the reinstatement of a non-

reluctant to agree. So what could be the way out? Like our proverbial dilemma, the Awami League hates change, but loves it at the same time, keeping the leadership factor intact. The opposition party has very little flexibility as it cannot suggest a non-political person without raising serious objections from the government party. The PM would not accept it and her party would follow suit.

Some veteran political analysts have fallen back on the existing parliament members who have the respect in tolerable degree of all the mainstream leaders, including those of the opposition. The problem is, will such a parliamentary call upon the prime minister or the leader of the opposition to listen to what he has to say in the conduct of his electoral actions? Can we see such a person in the front, middle or in the back benches with that degree of political experience, sobriety and maturity?

Some maverick analysts have suggested that former president Ershad could possibly be a choice. Although he heads the third largest political party in the parliament he was after all the president of the country for long nine years and has returned to the country's representative assembly after winning all his elections in a convincing way. The terms under which he will be allowed to accept this responsibility will have to be negotiated by the parliament members. He has to be absolutely impartial, strict and uncompromising when delivering a flawless election result.

If Ershad has any desire to leave behind a legacy that will make him be remembered, this could be his opportunity. Posterity would remember him as a man who in spite of his past shenanigans has for once presided over an election that has saved the nation from a grave political situation. What a name to be remembered by.

If all parties take up what the prime minister has herself initiated, she herself has to do more than others to see the elections through in a free and fair manner. She has to first take actions so that mutual trust and understanding are generated between the government and opposition members. She must immediately make a political gesture by releasing all opposition political elements from the prisons. She must encourage the civil society to freely put forward suggestions that will help hold a free and fair election. The Election Commission must be at once strengthened so that the right people and the optimum resources are placed at its disposal. Let fear and uncertainty of the forthcoming elections be replaced by a feeling of confidence and joy by all the election stakeholders.

The prime minister must explicitly take steps to stop all her political leaders from making statements that vitiate the peaceful election atmosphere. Her associates should not be allowed to unilaterally create difficulties in any constituency to thwart the efforts of opposition candidates to run a free election. Likewise, the opposition leader must work in tandem with the interim government to behave in an exceptional responsible way.

Bangladesh is now at a political crossroads. We have to take careful steps and feel our way together to reach the goal of violence-free, fair election participated by all parties.

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## Politics in Washington and US shutdown

MAHMOOD HASAN

POLITICS in Washington has turned nasty. For quite sometime the two major political parties -- Democrat and Republican -- have been quarreling, trying to outdo each other. On September 30, the Congress refused to raise "debt ceiling" and pass the budget.

Since the House did not pass the budget the Federal government technically had no money to spend on October 1. That led to shutting down of some Federal services across the country, as the Obama administration could not pay them salaries. It sent some 700,000 people on furlough. The last time such a shutdown occurred was in 1996.

United States is the largest economy in the world. The cycle of American budget runs from October 1 to September 30. In April 2013, President Obama presented the budget for 2014 to the Congress for approval. The projected budget outlay was \$ 3.778 trillion. Revenue during fiscal 2014 was estimated at \$ 3.034 trillion. Thus, the projected shortfall was \$ 744 billion, which is 4.4 % of GDP.

Unless the Congress allowed the Treasury to borrow the deficit amount of \$ 744 billion and approved the budget, the government could do nothing. The president does not have powers to circumvent the Congress and go on spending. Thus to pass the budget the "debt ceiling" had to be raised.

The problem here is that the Treasury is already neck deep in debt. As of September 2013 Federal debt stood at \$16.738 trillion. The "debt ceiling" of \$ 16.7 trillion was set by the Congress in May 2013. With such an enormous debt against an estimated GDP of \$ 17 trillion (2014) America is indeed the most indebted country in the world today. Theoretically speaking, if US were to pay off its creditors in one installment it would have to surrender its entire GDP to cover the total debt. Clearly, it is an untenable situation.

Why did the Congress refuse to endorse the budget? Well, it is simple. The House of Representatives of 435 seats is dominated by Republicans (also known as the 'Grand Old Party,' it has 233 seats), led by conservative Speaker John A. Boehner. Boehner laid down conditions that unless President Obama curtailed and postponed expenses related to "The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act," popularly known as "Obamacare," the House would not approve the Budget. The GOP was strongly opposed to "Obamacare," which came into effect on October 1. It was one of the main issues during the last presidential elections. Actually, the extreme right GOP caucus in the House, commonly known as the "Tea Party," was behind this fracas.

Thus, an ugly debate began in the House last September. The bruising debate continued as the dead line for approval of the new budget ended on September 30. The Republicans have been using their thin majority in the House to oppose the Democrat incumbent at the White House to gain political mileage. Interestingly, the Senate is controlled by the Democrats, and that has made things complicated for Boehner.

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The other more serious danger for the US Treasury was the possibility of "debt default" on its debt repayment. US creditors -- especially China and Japan -- had warned that if US failed to service its debt it would have serious consequences for the dollar and the world economy. China holds over \$ 1.27 trillion worth of US Treasury bonds and Japan over \$ 1.13 trillion. The first repayment of several billions of dollars was due on October 17. In case of default, the dollar would have taken a battering. US Treasury's borrowing rates would have shot up, international interest rates would have risen, US credit rating downgraded, economic recovery jeopardised, stock markets gone haywire -- the scenario is too chilling to contemplate.

The IMF had also expressed deep concern over the government shutdown and urged Washington to resolve the crisis quickly. World economic recovery from the 2008 recession is still fragile. US shutdown and possible "debt default" would deal a severe blow to the recovery process.

As the repayment deadline neared, the acrimony between the House and White House got uglier. President Obama refused to give in to Boehner's threat. Backing down on "Obamacare" would have been seen a surrender, affecting Democrats chances at the mid-term elections due in November 2014.

Since the shutdown, American public opinion has gone against the Republicans. The "Tea Party" came under severe criticism. Boehner found himself in pothole and accused the White House for refusing to be flexible and negotiate. Fearing backlash from their constituencies some Republican Congressmen openly opposed Boehner's hostage strategy. NBC polls showed that GOP popularity had dwindled.

After 16 days of endless antics and drama, ultimately the "debt default" threat compelled the Republicans in the House to give in. The House accepted a Senate drafted deal on October 16, just minutes before the October 17 deadline. The budget has been passed for until January 15, 2014 and "debt ceiling" has been raised for until February 7, 2014. Though major stock markets around the world heaved a sigh of relief for now, more political battles lie ahead.

This unnecessary political squabbling cost the US economy more than \$ 24 billion in lost production during the 16-day shutdown. The actual cost will be much higher. With the last minute deal Congress returned from the brink of "fiscal cliff." President Obama stood firm and called the GOP bluff. But it was a pyrrhic victory for the Democrats.

Shutting down the government is certainly not the way to force the presidency to abandon its priorities. The whole episode smacks of narrow political brinkmanship by Boehner and the "Tea Party."

Clearly the Democrats and the Republicans have drifted far apart ideologically and changed the political narrative in Washington. When egos clash and politicians cannot see wider national interest democracy becomes dysfunctional.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

## LETTERS

### TO THE EDITOR

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### Registering BNF: EC should be circumspect

The longer the process of registering the Bangladesh Nationalist Front takes, the more suspicious it appears. While there is debate over whether a similar party symbol was requested, the name, initials and advertisements of the BNF seem to be designed only for the purpose of creating confusion among voters and splitting the number of legitimate BNP votes in an election which in turn would benefit the AL. The granting of additional extensions to the BNF to meet registration criteria by an EC that has not always shown an ability or willingness to stand up to the government, adds to this perception. In order to protect voters and prove that it is a legitimate attempt to launch a new party, the EC must request the BNF change its name, perhaps to the National Front of Bangladesh (NFB) or simply National Front (NF). If they refuse this request their registration should be denied.

Neil Taylor  
On e-mail

### Killing sacrificial animals before children

During Eid-ul-Azha I always have mixed feelings as I suffer terribly when I see that animals are being slaughtered in a festive mood right in front of our children. Even the young madrasa students help in slaughtering sacrificial animals. These slaughtering is done in open places where people can watch. I just wonder if we ever studied the impact of such slaughtering on our children's psyche. Such slaughtering should be done after making sure no child is watching. We should be sensitive to our children if we want them to be better humans.

Dr. Md. Kamrul Hassan  
Professor  
Department of Physics  
Dhaka University

### No power at Sundarbans' cost

In no way we should take any decision destructive to the world's largest mangrove forest -- the Sundarbans. We need electricity but not by damaging our forests, rivers and ecosystem. Our rivers, forests and hills are already under threat due to the greed of land grabbers and developers who work in collaboration with a few corrupt government officials. The only one we are left with is the Sundarbans. Now if it is damaged in the name of producing electricity, then definitely our existence will be under threat.

M. A. Razzaq  
Kalabagan, Dhaka

### Comments on news report, "Sundarbans threatened," published on October 13, 2013

Vikram Khan

Greed, greed, greed, greed...

Sadsada

We need to beg more to the UN for environmental funding--our country is like the beggar in front of a Friday mosque, who has the physical capacity to work but no mental impetus to do so.

Alekanda

Influential politicians are looting the land near the Sundarbans. These selfish, shameless and greedy looters are also behind the establishment of Rampal Project. Shame on you, looters! Are we living in an autocratic country?

Fardeen

By playing with our national interest India is making a big mistake.

Shahin Huq

Such ecological destruction is perhaps possible only by Awami League. And most probably only the intellectuals affiliated with the party can remain quiet and complicit with such devastation. Sad for Bangladesh.

Dewan Jaglul

Carry on, you myopic greedy people and your worthless government. It should not be hard to eliminate the forest and its animal habitats so that nothing except its name remains such as in the cases of Kalabagan, Kathalagan, and so on. The future generation may then say, "Perhaps, there used to be a forest here once."

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### "Hanif 'removed'" (October 13, 2013)

Hafeeul Alam

It's an internal affair of Awami League or is it? I don't know if the prime minister had very compelling reason to select this person as joint secretary general. Any layman would say that both the secretary general and the joint secretary general of AL are no match for their counterparts in BNP.

Saleh Tanveer

For all the show of fealty to the queen over the years, one transgression is a bit too much for her! Such is the state of our despotic 'democracy'.