

No agreement, only talks

Political future continues to be uncertain

TWO telephone calls from John Kerry, US Secretary of State and Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary General, to our Prime Minister clearly demonstrate what a matter of serious concern Bangladesh's internal political situation has become to the international community. Both calls referred to the War Crimes Trial and the recent violence.

This was in addition to the hectic shuttling by UN envoy Mr. Taranco for the past several days. His only success was to bring the two sides to start the dialogue.

Opposition BNP's demands like releasing their jailed leaders, reopening of the party's central office, allowing them to hold political programmes including rallies, street processions sound reasonable. Equally pressing are the ruling AL's demands that the opposition should withdraw blockades, hartals and attendant vandalism including arson attacks on vehicles.

However, the government's continued incarceration of BNP leaders has made it look more and more oppressive and dictatorial.

We must warn both sides that they seem to be oblivious of how disgusted people are of their present political activities and how badly they are suffering due to the violence.

While the UN was able to start the dialogue we insist that it must be earnestly followed and a compromise reached for the sake of the people and the country.

No end to patients' woes

Fighting in hospital is shameful

GIVEN the ferocity with which contending groups fought at Mitford hospital last night, one could easily have mistaken it for a face-off between rival political parties during a hartal. This sort of commotion at a hospital and that too between professionals who are all members of the medical fraternity is hardly acceptable behaviour. We find it deplorable that hot words can lead to scuffles that embroil hospital staff and medical internees. This is not the first time this has happened at a public hospital. In fact such behaviour appears to have become ingrained in some of our hospitals.

The downside to all the commotion with one group of people blaming the other for starting the problem is that ordinary patients, the bulk belonging to the lower income brackets are bereft of receiving much-needed medical attention. Does it matter who said what? Why can't we settle our differences like other people do? Why must it always end up in a clash? Most important of all, how can these people claim to be caregivers if they must resort to violent behaviour every time someone loses his or her temper and a minor issue turns into an explosive situation? The whole episode at Mitford hospital leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Taking advantage of the scuffle, students bunked classes, internee doctors staged protests on college grounds and 3rd and 4th class hospital employees resorted to beating up some students. Such callous and irresponsible behaviour simply is not consistent with the prestige

The world mourns

SHIREEN HUQ

AS the world mourns the passing of Madiba, I thought I would share with you this beautiful tribute to him. It is a creative work of art consisting of 50 steel rods symbolic of the years in prison. The world has lost one of its greatest leaders who was undeterred in his fight against apartheid and when the struggle was won when the most horrific of revenges would have been "justified," demonstrated even greater courage in forgiving those who had carried out the wrongs and injustice of the apartheid system. He showed the world that there can be justice without retribution and saved his country from anarchy and further bloodshed.



I grieve for the passing of Nelson Mandela, and I grieve for the fact that my country did not have the good fortune of a leader like him.

Our president is in S.Africa to attend the memorial service in Pretoria, leaving behind a country burning as a result of a political impasse between the two major political parties. There have been more than 55 deaths in the last one week, mostly ordinary people trying to go about earning their livelihood. Appeals to the president to intervene have fallen on deaf ears, as has a 3 day hunger strike for peace organised by freedom fighters last week.

I hope that the recalling of Mandela's life on television channels around the world will offer a fresh opportunity for world leaders as well as political leaders in Bangladesh to consider seriously and sincerely what Mandela stood for and struggled for.

The writer is an educationist.

An undignified acquiescence

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
 ndc, psc (Retd)

WE should thank the two parties for agreeing to not only sit down to address the political stalemate but also to meet again soon to continue the effort. At long last the two parties have agreed to talk, to solve an internal problem of Bangladesh. It is the change in attitude that is heartening; whether that would deliver us from this excruciating and stifling environment is still a difficult question to answer.

But if change in attitude is good news, what has been most distressing to a common man is the two parties relenting on their respective stands at the behest of an external peace broker, when nothing that the country and the people have been enduring, in the last fortnight in particular, could move them to engage in a dialogue to end the political violence and resolve the election-time government issue. What is it that Taranco said, what charm did he cast, what manna did he offer that was more convincing than the misery that we have been enduring the last two months? Whatever that was, it was perhaps more persuasive than the effects of violence that left 52 people dead and 1,300 injured, since November 25!

I am shocked, and I am sure that it is a feeling with which many would be encumbered with, that it took the intercession of the UN, and the talk took place at the residence of the resident coordinator of the UN, to end the standoff. Yesterday's cartoon in the front page of this newspaper, that depicts Taranco banging the heads of the two secretary generals, says everything about politics and politicians in our country. One is not sure what the two parties, the leaders in particular, feel, but anyone with a soft skin would have felt humiliated by such behaviour. It is callow behaviour displayed by a crop of callous leaders with scant regard for public interest.

The recent developments have displayed once again that our leaders are quite incapable of resolving political problems by themselves. That is not surprising because the problems are of their own making, quite often deliberate and perhaps sometimes these occur due to lack of vision. But what is disturbing is that there is neither acknowledgement of the mistakes nor honest efforts to rectify those. What we have seen so far is that there are efforts to provide an Awami League solution to a problem or a BNP solution, and those may not be the right solution to a national problem. And to get the right answer both must cast aside their mental straightjacket and think out of the box.

One cannot help at this point to reflect on political developments in a nearby country, a distant neighbour of ours, where democracy has seen ups and downs, and agitation and demonstrations often, but not such level of violence and so many deaths, and where the people's voice

is respected by the party in power.

The Thai situation has a marked contextual resemblance to ours. The agitation was against arrogance of power, against the use of parliamentary majority to ride roughshod over the demands of the minority and passage of controversial bills. It was feared that the "resulting legislative products would be flawed both in their substance and in their procedural integrity," very much like what we have seen happen with the 15th Amendment. And the Thai Constitutional Court had declared on November 20 the House's procedure in an effort to amend the Constitution "illegal."

In Thailand, PM Yinglakh Shinawatra dissolved the parliament well before its time and called for fresh elections in February. Prior to that there were huge demonstrations, there was agitation and, reportedly, four deaths. But there were no major holdups, very little, if at all, of public life was disrupted, train lines were not uprooted



and harmless civilians were not deliberately made targets of incendiary bombs. There was no police firing either and neither was the opposition prevented from bringing out demonstrations or hold meetings. And there were no intercessions from outside. Quite a contrast to what we have been used to seeing in this country.

And the Thai PM had the sagacity to read the message that the people, who had the support of the opposition party, were conveying. The action of the prime minister has neither been seen as her defeat or her being soft on the opposition.

Unfortunately, in our political dictionary compromise has become a synonym for capitulation, and weakness a synonym for accommodation with political opponents.

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The looming lost decade

THE NEW GLOBAL ECONOMY



ASHOKA MODY

AS 2013 comes to an end, it looks like the world economy will remain stuck in low gear. For those reading the tea leaves of global recovery, the third-quarter GDP numbers offered no solace. While the United States is ahead of the pack, some of its gains could soon be lost, as accumulating inventories begin eroding profits. Despite glimmers of hope, the eurozone and Japan are struggling to cross the 1% threshold for annual economic growth. And the major emerging economies are all slowing, with Russia practically at a standstill.

Not surprisingly, a catchphrase in economic-policy debates nowadays is "secular stagnation," the idea that excess savings chronically dampen demand. The economist Robert Gordon has also argued that the world is low on economically productive ideas.

But before we despair, there is work to be done. The coordinated fiscal stimulus that saved the world from economic collapse in 2009 disappeared too quickly, with governments shifting their focus to domestic politics and priorities. As domestic policy options have been exhausted, economic prospects have dimmed. A renewed emphasis on stimulus must be augmented by global coordination on the timing and content of stimulus measures.

The crisis was and remains global. Trade data tell the story: after increasing by about 7% annually in the decade before 2008, world trade fell faster than global GDP in 2009 (and more sharply than during the Great Depression). Once the brief stimulus-fueled recovery faded, growth in world trade again slowed quickly, falling to 2% year on year over the past 18 months. Disappointing export performance is largely responsible for the recent weakening of economic-growth prospects.

At the end of 2008, when the scale of the impending economic destruction was not yet apparent, Olivier Blanchard, the International Monetary Fund's chief economist, boldly called for a global fiscal stimulus, stating that, in these "not normal times," the IMF's usual advice -- fiscal retrenchment and public-debt reduction -- did not apply. He warned that if the international community did not come together, "vicious cycles" of deflation, liquidity traps, and increasingly pessimistic expectations could take hold.

Fortunately, world leaders listened, agreeing in April 2009 at the G-20 Summit in London to provide a total of \$5 trillion in fiscal stimulus. The US and Germany added stimulus amounting to about 2% of GDP. And China's banks pumped massive amounts of credit into the country's economy, enabling it to sustain import demand, which was critical to the global recovery.

But hubris rapidly set in, and parochial interests took

over. Before the wounds had fully healed, the treatment was terminated.

The worst offenders were the US and Germany, which shirked the responsibility to protect the global common good that accompanies their status as economic hegemony. The United Kingdom, with its contrived rationale for fiscal austerity, was not much better. Fiscal stimulus by these three countries -- together with smaller contributions from France and China -- could have continued the necessary healing.

Countries now seem to think that monetary-policy measures are their only option. But, whereas fiscal stimulus boosts growth at home and abroad, enabling mutual reinforcement through world trade, monetary policy is guided primarily by domestic goals, and, in the short term, one country's gain can be another's loss.

America leads the world in monetary-policy ambition. The researchers Cynthia Wu and Fan Dora Xia estimate that the US Federal Reserve's open-ended asset purchases (so-called quantitative easing, or QE) have led to an effective US policy rate of -1.6%. QE helped American exports by weakening the dollar relative to other currencies. Once the Japanese engineered their own QE, the yen promptly depreciated. That has kept the euro strong.

The weakest of the "big three" developed economies -- the eurozone -- has thus been left with the strongest currency. In the third quarter of 2013, Germany's export growth slowed and French exports fell. After a spike earlier in the year, Japan's exports have also contracted. Only US exports have maintained some traction, thanks to the weaker dollar.

In the 1930's, after the gold standard broke down, world leaders could not agree on coordinated reflation of the global economy. In his book *Golden Fetters*, the economist Barry Eichengreen argued that the lack of coordinated action dragged out the global recovery process. Such delays are costly, and risk allowing pathologies to fester, prolonging the healing process further.

Now, despite unfavorable political circumstances, Blanchard should make an even bolder call. These are still not "normal" times, and the "vicious cycles" persist. Another global fiscal stimulus -- focused on public investment in infrastructure and education -- would deliver the adrenaline shot needed for a robust recovery.

More public investment is twice blessed. It can shake the world out of its stupor; and it can safeguard against "secular stagnation." The US, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and China should act together to provide that boost. Otherwise, a sustainable global recovery may remain elusive, in which case 2014 could end in low gear as well.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Jamdani in UNESCO's cultural heritage list

In this month of victory, Bangladesh has earned yet another accolade. The country's exquisite 'Jamdani' has been added to the UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity this year. On behalf of all artisans, patrons and connoisseurs of this weaving art, I would like to congratulate the four-member Bangladeshi delegation to bring such a laurel for the country. The delegation must have been very convincing in presenting the proposal in favour of Jamdani's unanimous inclusion to the prestigious list at the conference in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, held in the first week of December.

This rare honour was due for a long time and the dedicated Jamdani artisans deserved this much needed international recognition. The merit, brilliance, craftsmanship and exquisite sense of design of these weavers has passed through generations and they have preserved it with dedication in spite of many odds. The craft, particularly the main product of this process, Jamdani sari, is very much an intangible cultural heritage of this country and its people.

Our permanent representative at the UNESCO deserves special felicitation for this success. We hope that our government will do everything necessary to further develop this industry and arrange for the welfare of these skilled artisans.

Maleka Khan
 Former President
 Banglacraft

Thank you, Ershad

Our heartfelt thanks to Jatiya Party chairman HM Ershad for taking a very wise decision. He declared that his party will not participate in the polls as the atmosphere for an inclusive election is absent. He had asked his party candidates to withdraw their nomination papers and JP ministers to leave the all-party government.

We hope and trust that this time he will stick to his words and will not flip-flop again. If he remains steadfast, he will be able to erase many a blemish on his past political record from people's minds.

We are grateful to HM Ershad for taking the right step at a critical moment when the country is on the verge of collapse. We are praying; may Almighty Allah save us from destruction.

Nur Jahan
 Chittagong

Comments on commentary, "Are our leaders at war against citizens?" published on December 10, 2013

Jafar Iqbal
 Descendants/relatives of the leaders (Sheikh Mujib and Ziaur Rahman) are just fighting for their own fortunes and money where citizens are just their disposable weapons.

Mohi
 Concise and well-argued. Passionately written. However, one wonders whether the two leaders will read this article. They simply don't care: Let the country go to hell, let the citizens suffer, let the common people die. All these don't affect them.

Deshi
 It is ironic that we take to the streets for everything from cricket victories to political causes but stay silent when our basic rights to safety and livelihood are in peril.

Saleh Tanveer
 In any other democracy, people would flock to the streets in record numbers, surround the offices of the PM and the leader of the opposition with teeming hundreds of thousands and force them to come to terms with each other. If our people cannot get mobilised now, just because they are afraid of these two leaders and their minions, then may be we don't deserve democracy.

Mohammed Ismail
 They are not the leaders of common people. We should reject those who do not think of us.

Rezaul Karim
 It's not because of Khaleda, it's because of Hasina that we are in this deep hole. She wants to stay in power till her death.

Ben 10
 In today's DS, there is a picture of PM presenting flower bouquet to the president. The nation is burning and hundreds are dying but the leaders are all smiles with floral bouquet. The picture tells the story. The leaders are not at all bothered about nation and its people.

Bangladeshi
 I totally agree with you sir. In the 21st century, even the soldiers at war show mercy to the common people but there is no such situation in Bangladesh.

Mortuza Huq
 I always like Mr. Anam's writing. However, in this context I feel it is unfair to blame the two leaders equally. Because, if you conduct a poll among your readers asking who they think is to be blamed more for the current crisis, probably more than 70% will say Hasina over Khaleda.

Disqus
 I believe it is important to move away from party based blame game. The main issue at hand is that leaders are not concerned about the welfare of the people but rather to hold on to or obtain power. And the nation and its citizens are regressing. All these parties have failed the people of the country.

AA
 Are killing people, destroying industries, transports etc., weapons for earning a CTG? Why didn't BNP sit for talk when AL called the opposition leader?