

A dire consequence of blockade

Bumper Aman crop laid to waste

THERE has been a bumper production of Aman paddy this year. That should naturally have led to lower prices in the market for consumers. At the same time, had circumstances been more propitious, growers of Aman paddy could have expected, for the first time in the past three years, profits from the produce after continued losses over a number of seasons.

In the past month and more, political restiveness in the form of hartals and blockades have put paid to the hopes engendered by this bumper production of the crop. It is once again the growers who see their hopes dashed because of the grave difficulties in transporting Aman rice from one area to another owing to the political situation. Gluts have grown as moving stocks and milling have become problematic due to transportation blockades.

While supply side should have been bolstered through increased output, consumers are having to purchase rice at higher prices. Where providing relief to growers is concerned, the suggestion made by Brac that the government ensure a minimum of 5,00,000 tons of paddy in stockpile sounds reasonable. The problem, though, is that political chaos has created a situation where the authorities are not quite sure if they can create a stock of even 2,00,000 tons of the crop.

The situation should be seen as a wake-up call to the nation's political circles, on both sides. The farmer needs fair prices for his produce. The consumer must not see his pocket thinning as he tries to buy rice. Can politics at all ensure that?

Vandalism on highway

Govt must get to grips with the problem

IT was perhaps with good intention that the government had decided to break the blockade on the highways and keep those open to inter - district traffic, although one may question the prudence of the policy because of the ability of police to implement it. From reports in this newspaper it appears that the police have not been completely successful in ensuring full safety of the highways or the convoys. Although we do not have the exact number of vehicles that moved on the highways under police protection we are rather dismayed that in spite of it the blockaders managed to damage more than 100 vehicles on Saturday.

It appears that while we have on the police strength some very highly trained groups that provide security to very very important persons, we are sorry to say that not enough police have the knowledge of how to move convoys tactically through hostile areas, and perhaps that is not their duty to do so. And that is what begs the question. From reports it appears that the blockaders used hit and run tactics, and in one place alone damaged fifteen vehicles.

If the government is holding out assurance of safety on highways should that not be done in a planned manner and by trained people? After all, life of the people cannot be compromised because of policies that are motivated by emotions rather than reason. If the government wants to guarantee public safety it should be well equipped to do so. From reports it seems the government is not.

Street etiquette

NUSRAT M. JAHAN

AS a young woman who prefers walking rather than using a rickshaw to a destination a mere ten minutes away, it is quite a difficult task to get around by foot in Dhaka. Sometimes it becomes a question of what would I rather deal with today -- walk on the footpath and be shoved by groups of men or walk on the street and get hit by a Toyota Prado. While walking on the sidewalk, I get pushed by men who seem to think the sidewalks are their own. No one seems interested in saying "excuse me" to get around a fellow pedestrian or even saying "sorry" for shoving someone. Instead of stepping aside and letting a woman pass through, they will make sure to ignore her completely and walk past her.

This makes walking a frustrating and uncomfortable experience in Dhaka. What is even more upsetting is when cars on the road refuse to brake for women trying to cross the street with their children. Even though one can eventually shrug off being pushed while walking, getting hit by a car is a far more serious matter. Instead of stopping, drivers blow the horn then swerve towards the opposite direction and continue driving. Regardless of slow or heavy traffic, drivers will never give pedestrians the right of way. The traffic officers that I have seen around my neighbourhood are always too apathetic to help in these situations. They are more engrossed in their own safety than the safety of the pedestrians.

When I see either a child or someone elderly walking towards me, I step aside to let them pass. I am astonished as to why Bangladeshi men cannot take a few seconds of their time to stop and let a woman or a child pass either while walking or driving behind the wheels of a car.

We should encourage walking as it is a good form of exercise especially when other forms of physical activities are extremely limited in Bangladesh. Walking to a close destination also helps to ease the amount of rickshaws required on the roads. In order for walking to be more of a norm and for it to be safe in Dhaka, there needs to be greater care and respect towards the pedestrians from both fellow pedestrians and drivers. Where is the chivalry, Bangladesh?

The writer is an English teacher.

Minorities - our sacred trust

S.M. RASHED AHMED

ONE of the acid tests of the progress achieved by a society is the way the majority community treats its minorities -- the weaker and vulnerable ones. The government, which is primarily responsible for the protection of the minorities, is itself dominated by the majority, including the parliament and the organs of the state and the government. Therefore, the best protector of the minority community is the majority community.

Bangladesh can take justifiable pride in its tolerance and protection of the minorities. The recent spate of violence in Satkhira, targeting the Hindu community, should fill us with shame and mortification. This is contrary to our national character, religion, cultural ethos and ideals of our Liberation War. One would have expected that the government, backed by all political parties and the Muslim majority neighbours, would have acted much more forcefully and promptly to prevent the attack on the minorities.

The attacks demonstrated the utter failure of the government, the law enforcing agencies and the Muslim majority community. We call upon the government to prevent recurrence of such despicable attacks on the minorities by giving exemplary punishment to the culprits. This should be followed by collective action by the majority community and the minority community to infuse a sense of security and confidence, and create conditions for those who left their hearths and homes to return.

Bangladesh is heir to the finest civilisations, religions and culture that flourished in the past -- Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Our folk music, literature and songs; the ancient temples of Dhakeshwari and Ramu; the relics of Mahasthangarh, and the Shait-Gombuj Mosque are our proud heritage. By nature, Bangladeshis wish to keep religion separate from politics, hence the people overwhelmingly vote for major parties which are committed to a multi-religious and multi-cultural Bangladesh.

The deplorable incident in Ramu and outbreak of communal violence during and after elections must not be allowed to happen, because they tarnish the image of Bangladesh as an oasis of communal peace and harmony. There is no room in Bangladesh for extremism, militancy and terrorism. As Aristotle said: "Small sparks could be the beginning of larger ones."

From experience in Kosovo of the handling of inter-religious and inter-ethnic differences and conflicts it is clear that the active engagement of government representatives at the grass root levels assisted by the law enforcing agencies, intelligence, para-military forces, political parties, imams, monks of the monasteries and interfaith groups; banning of hate speech and writings and introduction of education for peace in the school curriculum, significantly helped the strengthening of peace and interfaith harmony. Crucially, the support of the media considerably assisted the peace process.

Though Kosovo cannot be compared to Bangladesh there are important lessons to be learnt. The UN administration gave topmost priority to the establishment of the rule of law to back the evolving democratic process; holding of free, fair and democratic elections; and initiation of

policy and action to end the culture of impunity of those who tried to derail the political process through threats and intimidations. There was zero tolerance for those who violated the law, and for corruption and unethical practices, thus laying the foundation of good governance.

With the fast deteriorating law and order situation in Bangladesh marked by increasing use of force and violence, all political parties and citizens have to collectively come forward for restoration of peace, upholding of the rule of law and protection of the general public, particularly the minorities. Under no circumstances should we allow the situation to slide into anarchy and violence on the minorities, or to assume such proportions that would force them to leave their hearths and homes as refugees; a fear raised in a section of the Indian media.

We need to adopt a two-pronged strategy involving (a) all-out effort through dialogue to resolve the political crisis and (b) the government and the opposition working collectively for an end to violence and use of force to settle issues which are basically political. While the onus for this lies on the government it has to be a collective action involving all the parties including the civil society. If the situation is allowed to drift it will



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jeopardise our democracy.

In the 21st century, human rights has been one of the major factors of good governance. If there is continued large scale violation of human rights it could mean the end of the vision of a stable, multi-religious and tolerant Bangladesh for which we fought. The preoccupation with the single agenda of gaining power and holding to it at any cost should no longer be the prime consideration as the nation is in the throes of an unprecedented crisis. It is time to save the country through collective selfless action rising above all personal and partisan interests.

We need the support of our regional and international friends, particularly India, China, the US, EU, Japan, to help stabilise Bangladesh. The effects of conflagration in a country of 160 million people may have regional and global ramifications. The time bomb is ticking and needs to be defused now.

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America is unilateralist, not isolationist

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

WENT about saving the world with the passionate commitment of a virtuous wrecking crew, and turned large parts of the map into a black and white movie coloured with bloodstains.

To be fair, they had just emerged from a barbarous war in which millions were killed in the name of patriotism, and a genocide occurred in the heart of Europe. They were fearful of repetition. But the cloaks they wore, and daggers they flourished, did almost as much damage to America as it did to its foes.

Nothing, however, quite explains the naiv  t of John Foster, at least in this instance.

Dulles was very keen to bring Pakistan into yet another of his regional alliances against Communists. This one was SEATO: the South East Asia of this bloc stretched, on the Dulles drawing board, from Iraq and Iran to Indonesia. Having given up on Pakistan's fractious civilian politicians, Dulles wooed the new nation's generals with a gift they could not refuse: weapons, with a finesse through civilian government, a legacy that has contributed to ambitions in the barracks and consequent coups.

Dulles explained to the journalist Walter Lippman in an interview. "I've got to get some real fighting men into the south of Asia. The only Asians who can really fight are the Pakistanis. That's why we need them in the alliance. We could never get along without the Gurkhas."

A puzzled Lippman pointed out: "But Foster, the Gurkhas aren't Pakistanis."

"Well," said the sanguine Dulles, "they may not be Pakistanis, but they're Moslems."

"No, I'm afraid they're not Moslems either."

"No matter!" exclaimed Dulles imperiously, and carried on for another half an hour with a suitable sermon on how to stop reds from menacing our beds.

Today's secretary of state John Kerry knows geography, history and religion much better than his predecessor, but

America has been neither isolationist nor interventionist, as much as unilateralist. It is a world view that emanates easily from the fact of military supremacy and the gradual imposition of superpower culture through the wings of trade and mass entertainment.

incidents arise, minor or major, that still leave one wondering: how far is Washington from the rest of the world? Or how far are the rest from Washington?

A curious aspect of American foreign policy in the American century -- the twentieth -- has been the oft-mentioned tendency to retreat into isolationism. This is not quite correct. America has been neither isolationist nor interventionist, as much as unilateralist. It is a world view that emanates easily from the fact of military supremacy and the gradual imposition of superpower culture through the wings of trade and mass entertainment. The Romans believed that their empire was good for the defeated with as much sincerity as Americans believe that their forms of government, and their values, are synonymous with civilisation. In a variation, America would prefer to co-opt nations into its umbrella, rather than seize them, because democracy and liberty are its fundamental values. But when persuasion fails, responsibility for the expansion of civilisation is so easily transferred to the Pentagon.

The superpower model becomes inarguably superior, whether it is in the macro functioning of legislatures, or micro arrangements for domestic service. Any alternative is dismissed as unjust, inadequate, or illegal. This logic does not, however, always travel in both directions. An American working in India earns an American salary, but is highly unlikely to pay by American norms for cooks in the Delhi embassy [technically, American soil].

It is not the financial difference that grates upon the rest of the world, but the implicit sense of superiority, the feeling that there are always two laws, one for a superpower and one for the rest of the world. America can, for instance, demand, and get, diplomatic immunity for Raymond Davis, a spy masquerading as contractor, who killed two men in Lahore's broad daylight. Islamabad accepted this fudge as the price of relations with Washington. Other nations might not be able to comply with equal felicity, not least because their elected governments have to factor in public opinion.

Governments, as we have seen, can sometimes get things right for the wrong reasons. This is more difficult when it comes to the street. In the case of Devyani Khobragade, the Indian diplomat who was treated harshly by a pompous American law enforcement officer, tensions will cluster around popular opinion long after they have eroded in government. Washington and Delhi need to recognise this, quickly. A ship cannot be lost for half-penny of tar.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Problem is AL won't give up power

I have noticed that in the talk shows of different television channels, many participants when speaking about the present political unrest in the country declare that things have come to such a pass because one political party wants to remain in power and the other party wants to come to power. But, I think it is half-truth: the first part is correct while the second part is incorrect.

The Awami League-led government is trying to remain in power at any cost. They have become desperate and are behaving in the most outrageous ways. On the other hand, the opposition political party is reiterating their one and only demand of a free, fair and credible election in which people will be able to cast their votes without fear.

As the government is claiming that they have run the country well, then why is it afraid to hold the election under a neutral government? The government must immediately restore CTG and save the country from destruction.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

India can help us out

We have celebrated 43rd anniversary of Victory Day. Had there been no Indian support, this victory could have been very difficult and had there been no Bangabandhu, it would have been an impossible task. The entire nation would agree with me, I trust.

What emanates from the media is India has a difference of opinion with the US, which is causing problems. I would urge India not to insist on its position. Let BNP take part in the elections after meeting their demand for CTG system. Once a fair and participatory election is held, whoever leads the administration may bring back peace in the country. Let this annihilation of citizens be stopped first. The entire nation would be grateful to India.

Iqbal Ali Khan
Dhaka

Comments on post editorial, "PM's gift: A voterless election," published on December 20, 2013

Md. Zakir Hossain

Dear Mahfuz Anam, maintaining GDP above 6% is the achievement of the people working abroad, of farmers and garments workers, not of the government. The way the constitution was amended to suit a person's will shows she doesn't give a damn about people's rights. She wants to stay in power by fair means or foul.

Deep purple blue

Thanks for the good article, Mr. Editor.

Hasina is appointing MPs who are elected uncontested. The remaining 146 are candidates loyal to Hasina... does this not smell of Bakshal where the only leader nominates candidates?

Rumee

Bravo Mr. Anam for categorically denouncing the present situation created by the PM. Yes, the government has done a lot of good things (and you mentioned it), but those should be a part of another piece (in my honest opinion).

Salim Ullah

Now, it remains to be seen how far Sheikh Hasina would be able to display her political acumen to create a congenial atmosphere for exercising democratic norms, thus saving our hard-earned democracy and country.

Aasfisarwar

I think 99% problem will be solved if an acceptable person heads poll-time government.

Snr Citizen

These are bold steps for public good. Who is sane and bold? We love to stay bystanders all our lives.

Ash C.

And immediately reshuffle the entire administration and sack all those officials including the EC who showed their partiality towards AL candidates even in this farcical poll.

Akhtar Shah

Since this piece has been scribed, the language from both parties (as reported by TV and the press) is just as much (as before), if not more combative! Don't hold your breath!

"Of sleazy politics and sick politicians" (December 19, 2013)

Ibrahim Zaman

I was really amazed at the sense of humour and sarcasm of the writer.

Faisal

Sick or not, these politicians are serving their own bank balance very well, as a Daily Star report from today proves. These politicians are holding the 16 crore people hostage to serve their self-interests, and we are complying without any revolt. The latest example of disregard for the people is that the ruling party has already self-elected its members to represent more than half the parliamentary seats without even bothering to ask the respective citizens about their opinion.

Nasreen Chowdhury

Let's wait and see what the international community has to say about this charade in the name of democracy.