

# Timely distribution of textbooks

*What could be better New Year's gift to children*

TEXTBOOKS reaching the primary and secondary schoolchildren on schedule, their new academic year has begun on an auspicious note. It was undoubtedly a formidable task to achieve amid long spells of nationwide shutdowns and blockades.

It has all been possible, thanks to the relentless efforts of education minister Nurul Islam Nahid who completed this Herculean task.

We may also note that the results of junior and primary school certificate examinations were successfully published on December 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013 with highest ever pass percentages. And the list of similar records that the minister has set in the education sector is indeed remarkable, particularly by past standards.

The huge task of distributing around 300 million textbooks among some 30.73 million pre-primary to ninth grade students to every school of the country is something easier said than done. But proving many a naysayer wrong, Nahid has proved that it is possible. And millions of happy schoolchildren in proud possession of their textbooks bear testimony to this fact.

As one would expect, none of the achievements that go to Nahid's credit came easy to him. His path was never smooth, strewn as it was with hurdles created not only by the traditional bureaucracy but also by some of his own political colleagues.

Unquestionably, in addition to commitment to the cause, steadfastness and efficiency, it was his personal honesty and integrity that helped him most to overcome the obstacles in his way.

The looming clouds on the political horizon notwithstanding, the silver lining of the New Year is that at least the school-going children of the country will have something to rejoice over.

# Pressure of high cost of living

*People writhing under it*

THE Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) has submitted its annual report on prices of essentials. It confirms our apprehensions about sky-rocketing costs of living due to a combination of factors. This only accentuated during the last two months of supply chain ruptures on account of blockades and hartals.

As a result, 2013 closed on a cost of living index showing an increase of 11 percent compared to the level of last year. As a matter of fact, vis-à-vis 2012 the increase in living costs has nearly doubled from what was 6.42 percent that year.

The calculations were pegged to a list of daily necessities collectively labeled as consumer basket. This leaves out house rent, education, medical treatment and transportation whose costs have risen too.

The increasing gulf in incomes between the rich and the poor has had a telling effect on consumer plight. Even the loosely defined middle class is hard-put to balance its budget, most are eating into their savings or running into debts. Many are forced to slash their provisions thereby reducing calorie intake.

This dismal picture is out of sync with higher productivity. Agriculture has been hit hard through blockades that forced perishable goods to rot while the farmers of winter vegetables get paltry return on their investment.

Unless the government comes forward with rehabilitation package, a large segment of farmers may be pauperised with the consumers suffering ultimately.

# Enough is enough

M.A. SERAJ

TWO wrongs don't make a right. This saying could be applied in the case of our two national leaders -- Sheikh Hasina the daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Khaleda Zia, the widow of freedom fighter, president General Zia ur Rahman.

Both of them had the opportunity to rule Bangladesh and establish the long-cherished healthy democracy since they combined to oust former president General H. M. Ershad in 1991.

They ruled this country alternately for ten years each. Both the leaders are more or less equally repressive while in power, and corruption crossed all limits during their tenures. They have also failed miserably to establish good governance during these twenty years or so.

The people of this nation were generous and sympathetic and elected them (twice each) to the highest seat of power. But that does not constitute legal authority for establishing a dynastic rule in Bangladesh.

Roughly seventy percent of the population is still below the poverty line. The economy of this country is flooded with "black" money. This has led to an unhealthy consumer driven society and generated corruption, which has taken deep roots in all spheres of our lives and is now our biggest national problem.

Although Bangladesh is proud to be an independent nation with a Bengali identity after freeing itself from the domination of West Pakistan in 1971, it is sliding away towards being a failed state mired by growing political turmoil and declining economic growth.

Now is the time that both the leaders in question should stop and look for an honourable exit as there seems to be no way to look forward except to a dead end. Enough is enough.

The whole world is watching anxiously. They would like to see a stable Bangladesh, and expect us to make this country a place worth living in, in this age of globalisation.

The writer is an occasional contributor.

# STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD  
NURUL HUDA

preventive measures towards countering conventional as well as political crimes and terrorism. It was explicitly stated that the subject of tackling political terrorism would assume major importance in the days to come. Emphasis was laid on rethinking and reorientation of policy then pursued.

The grim reality, however, is that things have not altered positively. At present, statistics tell us that nearly 500 people died as a result of political violence in 2013; and the compounding tragedy is that since declaration of schedule of general election, 120 persons have died in election-related clashes in just thirty days.

One would not be naïve to believe that political murders or casualties owing to political rivalries are only a recent phenomenon. What, however, should worry all right thinking people is the gory nature of the mischief committed in 2013. The combatants have not rested after brutally beating the opponents to death in broad daylight, but have exhibited incredible bestiality by deliberately putting live human beings on fire.

The heart-rending wails of burn victims have not moved our stony politicians. The tragedy is that while the ordinary folks have died in the violent acts the leaders have remained unscathed, thereby bringing to the fore the ugly and selfish contour of our politics.

The continuing politics of confrontation between the two major political parties has been further smeared by the addition of manifest ferocity and subversion of activists of Jamaat-e-Islami. Quite clearly, there has been an ominously distinct shift in the mode of political protest. Whether it is the despotism of an obstinate establishment or the crippling desperation of the opposition that has brought us to the edge, there is no doubt that our supposedly pluralist existence is in real jeopardy.

The unbridled violence and consequent devastation caused by virulent Jamaat-Shibir activists, in Chittagong particularly, are cause for genuine concern. Quite curiously, while they are not causing inconvenience in Maheshkhal-Kutubdia area, where Jamaat won a parliamentary seat in last general election in 2008, they are hyperactive in Lohagora-Satkania area of South Chittagong. Their mischief is manifestly diabolical in that they want to disrupt communication between Chittagong and Cox's Bazar, thereby setting at naught the economic activities centering an internationally famed tourist spot. Similarly, they want to cripple the Dhaka-Chittagong road communication, which is the lifeline of Bangladesh's economy, by committing deliberate sabotage at Sitakunda. Quite clearly, these are violent acts of protest falling outside the purview of constitutional politics.

In early 2005, this writer observed that, without doubt, the death of former finance minister Mr. Kibria had

# Brutalisation of Bangladesh polity

VIOLENCE of disturbing scale and dimension originating from political disputes has shocked citizens. Friends and well-wishers of our country are dismayed. To the discerning eye, however, the present scenario, though unfortunate, has not been unexpected because the forebodings and premonitions were there.

As early as February 2005, experts in Bangladesh had raised the issue of establishing government's credibility in dealing effectively with political crimes of different dimensions. Attention was also focused on taking

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ominous portents for budding politicians of the desired breed in the Bangladesh polity. The premonition is: Are we not creating a situation where half-educated brats with no commitment and compassion will occupy the centre stage of politics for a painfully long time? Cynical comments like "politics is the last refuge of a scoundrel" will gain credence if we fail to arrest the rising tide of violence and properly investigate the crime.

To recollect, political activities, partly on account of historical factors, have assumed a dominant agitational character. Over the years, since after liberation and more particularly during the anti-autocracy movement in the eighties leading to the fall of the military dictatorial regime in December 1990, political protests have demanded crude physical courage from the field level activists of the political movement. As the dictatorial regime primarily depended on brute power and looked towards non-political quarters for its sustenance, it did not bother about the excessive use of force by the state apparatus. It had no qualms in utilising dangerous goons to intimidate and if necessary liquidate political party workers and leaders. Sadly, a section of the law enforcement personnel turned out to be a willing partner in such patently illegal acts.

The political scenario became so desperate and menacing that only the very physically brave and intensely committed workers could dare to take to the streets to face the insensitive actions of a despotic government nearly bordering on megalomania.

Under circumstances as above, it is quite difficult for the saner and more sensible elements of the young population to join movements for social change. Since nature abhors a vacuum, it is only natural that the vacancy resulting from the unwillingness of the desired people is automatically filled in by the ill-motivated desperados. The situation turns vicious and the training ground for constitutional politics witnesses detestable wheeling-dealing. Brawn takes precedence over brain at the formative years. No wonder, therefore, that our national level politics gets afflicted by this syndrome.

It is a sad commentary on our political reality that howsoever eloquent we may be on the subject of freedom of speech, assembly and movement, we can be the worst of autocrats when, under a clear democratic dispensation, the government of the day would not allow assembly and protest gatherings of opposition political party to venture beyond the immediate confines of the party office. The untenable thing is that the government would not issue prohibitory orders restricting or banning assembly of persons, but would transmit verbal order to embarrassed law enforcement personnel to virtually quarantine the opposition elements in a limited space.

In an exasperating situation as above, there is a desperate and frantic bid to defy the authority and such defiance requires lot of raw physical courage in addition to hardship and endurance. Clearly, such functions can be effectively performed by those who have a greater gift of the brawn. These may sound funny but are field realities with which the political operatives of the opposition are grappling. Breaking the ban or being able to defy the quarantine is considered a very important achievement. The goons are no small players in this game. One has to be in the thick of the happenings to feel the pulse of the men, matter, and movements.

The major political parties were committed to institutionalise democracy, which has so far remained a pious wish. In acts of political violence and terrorism, controversies are bound to arise. That should not blind the political-bureaucratic machineries of the state to take objective and unbiased steps that they are legally and morally bound to take for ensuring safety and security of all citizens. This is yet to be visible.

# Turkey's Iran strategy

## THE WORLD IN WORDS



SINAN ULGEN

Turkish policymakers are keenly aware that the agreement may upend the Middle East's fragile balance of power.

From Turkey's perspective, the nuclear deal, if successfully implemented and made permanent after six months, is set to eliminate a major security concern. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government does not want to be

*There are also significant economic considerations for Turkey, which relies on Iran for a substantial share of its energy imports. Equally important, as a neighbouring country, Iran has been a traditional trading partner -- a relationship worth more than \$15 billion per year.*

There are other reasons why Turkish officials have welcomed the interim agreement so warmly. First, they interpret the deal as vindication of their ill-fated effort in May 2010 (together with Brazil) to reach an agreement with Iran on the disposition of Iran's nuclear fuel. Turkish authorities continue to highlight that earlier tripartite agreement with Iran. The foreign ministry, for example, released a statement noting that: "The agreement...constitutes the first concrete positive development concerning Iran's nuclear programme since the Tehran Declaration of 2010."

Turkey is also satisfied that the deal does not weaken its position on sovereign rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Turkey has consistently defended the interpretation that states have the right to establish domestic uranium-enrichment programmes under the NPT, provided that they comply with their treaty commitments.

Even at the peak of diplomatic tensions with Iran, Turkey refrained from adopting America's more maximalist position, which challenged the validity of Iran's right to enrich uranium. So the tacit and conditional acceptance of this right is a satisfactory outcome for Turkey. Though Turkey currently has no plans to develop a fuel cycle of its own, its ambitious agenda for developing nuclear power has made policymakers intent on safeguarding the rights recognised by the NPT, including the right to enrich uranium.

There are also significant economic considerations for Turkey, which relies on Iran for a substantial share of its energy imports. Equally important, as a neighbouring country, Iran has been a traditional trading partner -- a relationship worth more than \$15 billion per year. As a result, Turkey's export potential has been negatively affected by the rising stringency of the sanctions regime against Iran, with trade losses estimated at \$6 billion for the first nine months of 2013. The gradual easing of the sanctions is expected to benefit Turkey's export industries, which hope to satisfy pent-up Iranian demand for consumer and investment goods.

Finally, in contrast to Arab states like Saudi Arabia, Turkey is generally comfortable with the deal's geopolitical ramifications. The improvement of Iran's relationship with the West and the easing of diplomatic pressure on the Islamic Republic is not a major concern. But, for the Gulf states -- and also possibly for Israel -- this scenario is viewed as opening the door to stronger Iranian influence throughout the region. These countries believe that, following the interim agreement, the US will fail to demonstrate sufficiently strong resolve to deter Iran from seeking regional hegemony.

In that case, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran will become more acute in the years ahead, emerging as the main destabilising factor in the region. It is in this context that Turkey's role as a secular power, one capable of transcending the sectarian divide, will become more important than ever. Turkish policymakers would be well advised to seize this opportunity to consolidate the country's effectiveness as a regional actor, one that is uniquely positioned to stem the danger of a widening -- and potentially extremely dangerous -- rift.

The writer is Chairman of the Istanbul-based Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) and a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe in Brussels.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Isn't PM also responsible for the violence?

Only forty-two years have passed since our independence, but already things have started to rot away. Never before have we felt this fear, uncertainty and hopelessness.

Many senior leaders of the BNP are charged with setting fire on vehicles or throwing cocktails. Interestingly, police could not arrest the miscreants who actually did it, and these leaders are charged on the assumption that they instigated the culprits. How funny! Quite a number of top BNP leaders are in jail. Hussain Muhammad Ershad is still in CMH, who was picked up by RAB when he refused to participate in the general election.

We are outraged by the government's low esteem for people. Does it think that people do no understand anything, or does it not care? Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is constantly blaming Khaleda Zia for the loss of lives and property. We do not know if all the havoc is created by opposition but we are sure about one thing: the reason behind this turmoil is the discarding of the CTG. So is not Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina mainly responsible for the present situation?

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong

## Remembering Mandela

I have learned a new concept of love from Nelson Mandela's autobiography: love out of anger and injustice against the rule of the white minority in South Africa. It is amazing to see that after serving 27 years in jail, Mandela became the first black president there, believing in reconciliation with the white for permanent peace and harmony. Mandela never nourished any revenge against the white people. He is now considered the Greatest Gift of God for South Africa.

Mandela was a great statesman with vision, courage, sagacity and magnanimity for the people of the whole of Africa. He was greatly impressed by our profound respect and honor shown to him when he visited the land of the Brave (as he said), Bangladesh in 2007.

May God grant him eternal peace.

Abul Ashraf Noor  
On e-mail

## Microbeads pose environmental hazard

Microbeads are tiny particles used for different scientific purposes. Plastic microbeads are used in beauty products such as face wash. But microbeads are environment pollutant. According to a recently published research report in the journal "The Marine Pollution Bulletin" high concentrations of plastics were found in U.S. lakes, particularly Lake Erie, with microbeads accounting for 90 percent of these plastics. These tiny plastic particles are washed down the drain, reach waterways and pollute water. The fishes and other aquatic animals eat these particles which cause serious harm to fish population. When humans consume these fishes, they also suffer health problems. These microbeads are not only polluting lakes but also seas.

In Bangladesh, beauty products containing microbeads are widely used but this should be stopped. Instead of using plastic microbeads in face wash, natural products such as ground nuts and fruit pits can be used which do not cause any harm to environment.

Professor M Zahidul Haque  
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## Comments on news report, "New Year starts with Nonstop Blockade," published on December 31, 2013

### Shadhin1008

Democracy is a myth and long live the myth.

### Morshed Alam

The weirdest New Year ever; I doubt if the ladies have anything better to offer us. And I hope good sense will prevail over all evil.

### Fakhrul Islam

Democracy march is more effective to paralyse the country because of the government's reaction.

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## "US, UK move to break deadlock" (January 01, 2014)

### Kalu\_Mia

Breaking the deadlock needs breaking the dead weight of Hasina regime.

### Jafar Iqbal

The whole world is already tired of these futile activities of diplomats for the last one year without any kind of practical solution.