

# Journey without destination



PLEASURE IS ALL MINE  
SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

Two reactive comments by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister H. M. Mahmud Ali, respectively, may have provided clues to the working of the government's mind. The PM's remark came with a touch of self-effacing candour and the FM's smacked of diplomatic finesse (read parrying, if you like). The PM whilst responding to a journalist's pointer to the sweeping win by BNP-loyalists in the Bar Council election said: "In the opposition we had our time of wins." This may be taken to imply that incumbency is not quite an election winner. The foreign minister for his part was confronted with a query from Canadian High Commissioner in Dhaka Ms. Heather Cruden on whether the government has plans to start a dialogue with the BNP anytime soon. Unfazed, the minister replied: "Like other societies Bangladesh has its own ways of maintaining equilibrium at the societal, state and people's levels. We have our own development trajectory which may not necessarily be in accord with others'. When a country faces terrorism, there is no option but to contain it." The prime minister is in a continuing incumbency cycle; her first term ended on an anti-incumbency note which was not helped by the exclusionary January 5 election. The Election Commission (EC) came bruised from the conduct of national election and got used to scripting a face-saver tally for the ruling party in the upazila polls, an impression that stripped away at the reputation of the EC built since 1991. If this is the foretaste of things to come



then the EC can rest assured that it will be under pressure from the executive to milk electoral victories to the ruling party. A demand for reconstitution of the EC is palpably building up. One would be surprised if this doesn't figure subsequently as part of rebuilding the elective process along credible lines. Into second term, five-years of 'assured power' is like a honeycomb attracting bees for favour hunts. Vested quarters are lolling in the new lease of life with a huge appetite for perpetuation of power and amassing wealth. Conflicts of interest are on the rise with government functionaries doubling as business partners. Although the government began by placing some erstwhile ministers under the anti-corruption scanner, the move may end up being palliative rather than curative. Coming to the foreign minister's recital of government's resolve to contain terrorism, there have been some new developments. The ruling party's capacity to fend off terror-

ism is historically proven and this reputation has been acquired not through any disconnect with religious sentiments of the people. It has its own kind of rapport with the Islamist constituency that strictly secularist elements are wary of. A value addition to AL's strength has come from unexpected quarters -- Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). The BNP finds a competitor within its extended fold in JI which has trounced JP as a third factor. To plumb deeper, significant wins in the upazila polls may have freed it from its depressive phase. One would have thought they have emerged in a soberer state from the electoral experience. Hopefully, its feel of popularity and absorption in local government institution will make it think twice before acting irresponsibly. One would be surprised if Jamaat-Shibir combine continues with any of those violent campaigns we saw mounted by it during two months prior to January 5 elections. On a broader plane, our present seems mortgaged to the past and the future is

obscured by the present. The tragedy is that even after 43 years of independence we carry a heavy baggage of past, full of conflicting emotions. These are holding us back from striding into the future, confident and heads held high with passports flashed as a badge of honour restored to its original glory of 1971. Even President Paul Kagame of historically troubled Rwanda could say: "Twenty years ago Rwanda had no future, only a past. Today, we have a reason to celebrate the normal moments of life, that are easy for others to take for granted." He was alluding to the genocide prior to 1994 that finished off a million, mostly Tutsis and some moderate Hutus. If tribes like Hutus and Tutsis can reconcile their differences for the sake of Rwanda why can't our two major established political parties shake hands under the blissful look of their compatriots? Look at Singapore, since its separation from Malaysia in 1965, Lee Kuan Yew's personal grief knew no bounds. The city state had little or no natural resources, it imported water from Malaysia, and had limited defense capacity to survive. Lee put the past firmly behind and focused on the future. He brought prosperity unheard of in the region. By the '80s under Lee's leadership with its mildly authoritarian style Singapore had a per capita income second only to Japan. Likewise Taiwan, dismissed as a tiny island since its de facto political independence from the Chinese mainland as early as in 1945-49, has turned out to be an economic powerhouse. Despite Beijing's one-China policy its relationship with Taiwan is a fascinating two-way traffic. Countries that put their past in place, and make use of their present unencumbered, can only look forward to a sustainable future. The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: husain.imam@thedailystar.net

## Angry brides



HUMOROUSLY YOURS  
NAVEED MAHBUB

My daughter chooses Joutuk Bondho Koro (Meena Series) for me to read to her while putting her to bed. "Baba, why would someone want a bicycle to marry someone?" Don't the two love each other?" Good point. If that's what he wants to ride, then why not have him marry a bicycle? He can have little tricycles to carry the torch of progeny. This guy is no ordinary Lance Armstrong. He surely gets turned on by bicycles, thus, giving a whole new meaning to the term 'bi-sexual.' The Bollywood version is a boy running after a girl, there's dripping rain, and somewhere in the love triangle, there is a wet bicycle. The steaming love scene is the bicycle being taken out of its packing case. Coming back to bed time stories. The king offers the hand of his daughter and half the kingdom, but only in return for slaying the indomitable dragon. And the task is accomplished by none other than prince charming. So, who is the guy who not only gets the beautiful princess but also the bicycle WITHOUT even having to slay a mosquito? Meet Mr. Right, the man for sale. Ok, and his cheer leaders -- his family too. Oh, don't forget the match making auntie. The dream team -- in search of a shareholder. Who cares about a life partner. Nothing in the world is free, so why should be our son. So much so is the prevalence of dowry that if the boy's father asks for none, the girl's father may ask, "Why? Is there something wrong with the boy?" So, what are the first words on the first fateful night of matrimony? "Darling. Have I been sold to you? Or have I been sold to the highest bidder?" Dowry has a long history in Europe, South Asia and Africa, it being a conditional gift in 'helping' the husband to discharge the responsibilities of marriage. The practice has long disappeared from Europe. But hey, we must hold on to the vestiges...After all, it is not a mere evil, it is the mother of many evils. Fear not. There is protection. The law: Take dowry and it's fourteen years of imprisonment. The unwritten law: Don't pay dowry and it's life imprisonment, oh, rigorous, may I add, for the girl. Sometimes, it's even worse. Sometimes, it's innovative -- take the recent case of the tech savvy macho man using Facebook to upload obscene images of his own wife, just to speed up the promised receivables. Many have been vocal in protest. We can write a serious note about a serious issue and have only ten people read it. Or, we can be serious about being funny about a serious situation delivered in a funny way and hope to get a wider, and more so, a pro-active audience. So, the Geek Patrol steps in. Angry Brides (yes, based on Angry Birds) is a free application on Facebook, which sees an angry bride attacking prospective grooms in response to their demands for dowry. The state-of-the-art arsenal in attack -- red stilettos, flip-flops and rolling pins. Wonder what would happen to the dowry seeker when approaching Cat Woman... Don't want to be the moving target of an online game? Simple -- just be a man, not a beggar. Act like a man and depend on your own earnings. Refuse dowry and diffuse the fiery death. Is that so hard? Meanwhile, I permanently click the 'Not Attending' button of the invite to a dowry-based wedding. The writer is an engineer & CEO turned comedian (by choice), the host of NTV's The Naveed Mahbub Show and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: naveed@naveedmahbub.com

# House of Lord's hearing on Bangladesh

BRAD ADAMS

For the past decade, Lord Avebury has organised regular hearings about Bangladesh in the House of Lords. These have often been important events since they provide a platform for the AL and BNP, among others, to have public discussions that, sadly, happen all too infrequently in Bangladesh. I've been invited to speak about the human rights situation at many of them, starting with the period of the last BNP government through the military-backed caretaker government and the current AL period. Often these meetings have produced more heat than light, as representatives of the two parties screamed, interrupted and almost came to blows with each other, but they have at least clarified in public where the parties stand on key issues. Last week the AL and BNP sent delegations to another well-attended hearing. The meeting was particularly important since the BNP and other parties boycotted the last election and parliament is not, at present, a venue for political debates. The good news is that it wasn't a slugfest. No chairs or punches were thrown. And aside from the last few minutes, there was no shouting. The AL and BNP took the hearing seriously and sent senior figures. The AL was led by H.T. Imam, a ministerial level political advisor to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The BNP sent Sabihuddin Ahmed, the foreign policy advisor to Khaleda Zia and her former private secretary when she was prime minister, who is also a former ambassador to the UK. Both made reasoned speeches setting out their party's views, focussed primarily on the elections. Other representatives of each party also made statements (some more eloquent and credible than others). Each side gave its version of why it was right and the other was wrong to take part in or boycott the elections. Each successfully pointed to the hypocrisy and inconsistency of the other: the AL used to be fervently in favour of the caretaker system for holding elections, while the BNP opposed it. The AL now wants Jamaat banned for the events of 1971, but in the 1990s entered into political alliances with Jamaat. The BNP now rails against the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and other human rights abuses, but it started Rab (and some BNP officials privately admit that from the beginning it was set up as a death squad to take out high level criminals). The BNP complains about repression against the media and NGOs -- but its time in power was characterised by arrests, attacks and intimidation of civil society. The blame game in Bangladesh is a bottomless

well. I and others described the bad and worsening human rights situation. Extrajudicial executions by Rab and "joint forces" are increasing. The ludicrous practice of "crossfire killings" in which the authorities use the same concocted story of a detainee somehow ending up the casualty of a gunfight is again on the rise. Disappearances are regularly reported. Arbitrary arrests number in the hundreds if not thousands. Courts issue "fill in the blank" arrest warrants which are often filled in later with the names of opposition supporters. Jamaat and BNP thugs set buses on fire, killing innocent civilians. Many police officers have been killed. Significant amounts of property have been destroyed. Hindu communities have come under serious attack. No discussion of human rights in Bangladesh could ignore the jailing and continuing court cases against Adilur Rahman, the director of Odhikar, and the harassment of his family. This has been particularly shocking and has been aimed at silencing an influential critic, as well as having a chilling effect on other organisations. Because Odhikar has had the courage to document abuses by government forces against Jamaat and Hefajat, the government has falsely claimed that Rahman is a supporter of both organisations. I know Adil and his family well, and nothing could be further from the truth. He is a fervent opponent of militancy. These are not only false but dangerous accusations in the current environment and should, as a basic matter of decency, be withdrawn. If the government doesn't agree with the reporting of a human rights organisation it has the right and the means to respond, but not by using the criminal law or sending the security forces to harass family members and staff. It was heartening that when I made this statement the room fell silent and people around the room, including AL supporters, were nodding. They can remember when previous governments targeted human rights activists, including those with ties to the AL. I ended with a plea: end the blame game and begin some long overdue introspection. Each party is so busy denigrating the other that it appears to have little or no capacity to consider what it has done wrong and what concrete steps it can take to improve. Indeed, it is striking how similar all the hearings called by Lord Avebury have been over the years: whoever is in power defends the indefensible, such as crossfire killings, while those in opposition become rabid defenders of human rights. Nothing illustrates this better than their rhetoric about Rab. When in opposition, AL members were being killed by Rab and the party called for its

abolition and for perpetrators to be held accountable. Just after coming to office, in early 2009, then foreign minister Dipu Moni famously went to the UN Human Rights Council and announced a "zero tolerance" policy for extrajudicial executions. We and others welcomed this statement. But the killings have continued. While in exile in London Sheikh Hasina promised me that she would control Rab and ensure it committed no further abuses. Yet Rab continues to kill and it remains the case -- 5 years after the AL came to power -- that not one member of the unit has ever been criminally prosecuted for a human rights abuse. When blatant abuses occur, such as the shooting of Limon, a 14-year old, the victim was charged with a crime and demonised instead of being compensated, with those who pulled the trigger prosecuted. Thankfully, those charges were later dropped, but only after a protracted campaign. Senior AL figures now loudly defend Rab and say it doesn't commit human rights violations. But this merely courts ridicule. No one in Bangladesh, including those who think Rab performs a valuable function in fighting crime and militancy, believes this nonsense. I ended my presentation at the House of Lords by saying that it was a wasted opportunity for AL and BNP leaders to travel all the way to London just to blame the other side, without accepting any responsibility for the condition of the country. No will believe them if they keep making hollow statements when in opposition or deny the obvious when in power. The reality is that no matter how polite diplomats and donors may be in private, the international credibility of both major parties is close to zero. This will affect the country in many ways, from aid and foreign investment to economic growth and participation in UN peacekeeping. It was sad that the AL and BNP had to travel to London to have a serious political discussion. This would have been a much more important event if it had happened in Dhaka, so long as it could be held in a respectful atmosphere. But can this happen if the country's leaders are unwilling to admit mistakes? The one hopeful aspect is that in private almost every Bangladeshi I spoke to agreed that the human rights situation has been bad under all governments and that each party needs to look inwards if they are to regain public trust and start serving the country's interests, instead of their own. I hope they took that message back to their party leaders in Dhaka. The writer is Asia Director of Human Rights Watch. (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

It has been said that man is a rational animal. All my life I have been searching for evidence which could support this.

Bertrand Russell

### CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

**ACROSS**

- Wild guess
- Faze
- Vietnam city
- Island south of Sicily
- In the lead
- Visitor from afar
- Gift tag word
- Bit of flood protection
- Brewing item
- "I-Rock"
- Facial pair
- Chestnut husk
- Holster fillers
- Spring
- Purr producer
- Upper, in Essen
- Flamenco cry
- Crash aid
- Talkative fellow
- Ram's mate
- Cow of commercials
- Navajo hut
- Rider's straps
- Trap
- Shoe parts
- Goals

**DOWN**

- Golf club part
- Western resort lake
- "The end of -"
- Big snake
- "Walk Like -"
- Lacking locks
- Cave raider of story
- Fill with mist
- Plane place
- "That sounds about right"
- Historic time
- Writer Jonson
- Winter rides
- Pisa genius
- Spoon or spatula
- Muff
- Crings in fear
- Meadow cry
- Kicked off
- Scar or Tony
- Trait carriers
- Have a repast
- Porgy's love
- Count start

### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A XYDLBAAXR IS LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: ANIMATION IS NOT THE ART OF DRAWINGS THAT MOVE BUT RATHER THE ART OF MOVEMENTS THAT ARE DRAWN.

- NORMAN MCLAREN

### BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

### HENRY

by Don Trachte