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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Welcoming 2015

Let's hope for better days

WITH the crack of the new dawn, we will set the old calendar aside to welcome the new one for the New Year. But still the past year will continue to influence us. That requires us to look back and assess our past performance while we embrace the New Year with positive expectations.

The redeeming feature has been sustained food autarky and improvement in socio-economic indicators in which we fared better than some of our South Asian neighbours.

Where did we leave the most important aspects of our national life, politics and governance, in the year that was? How did our state fare in establishing democracy and an exploitation-free just society? How far could the government ensure people's constitutionally granted basic rights like the right to health and education? What was our record of maintaining human rights? Could we rid our administration of the curse of corruption?

Can we put our hand on our heart and say that we could perform to the expected level in all these areas? Though unlike in 2013 or the years before, the streets of the capital or elsewhere in the country saw fewer agitations by the political opposition, that does not mean that peace reigned in the political life of 2014. The government's attitude towards the political opponents' right to assemble, hold rallies or take out processions was rather conspicuous by intolerance. Needless to say, the denial mode of the political leadership came in the way of its delivering good governance.

Nevertheless, we made steady headway in war crimes trial proceedings.

We look forward to good sense prevailing in the political discourse towards ushering in a positive outlook in 2015.

Happy new year to our readers and patrons.

Why this senseless negligence?

Railway's complacency must stop

THE horrid mishap between a lorry and an oncoming train on December 29 cost six lives. With hundreds of lorries loading and unloading goods inside the depot, is it too much to ask for signal lights to be functional? Though there have been conflicting reports on whether the signal lights were functional on that particular day, numerous shortcomings have been identified. With such huge traffic at the site, there are no barriers to control movement of vehicles inside the depot. Functionality of signal lights notwithstanding, this in itself gives rise to the possibility of serious accident which took place on Monday and lives lost.

The Truck and Covered Van Drivers' Union at the depot has also been demanding for some years that level crossings be installed inside the depot for safer movement of traffic. That demand along with others has fallen on deaf years of authorities. Now we may ask the question that had proper measures been installed to check the movement of trucks and lorries, couldn't the incident have been averted? Instead of piling the blame outright on driver recklessness, perhaps railway authorities would be better advised to install barriers and other structures that would ensure proper and safe movement of heavy transports in the depot. Given the series of accidents between locomotives and vehicles all over the country of late, it is high time proper measures were taken to

Systemic faults hurting road safety

RIDWAN QAIUM

THE recent horrific collision between a covered van and a train once again reminds us of the poor road safety situation in the country. There is no doubt that the drivers are mainly to blame in many of the mishaps but our system is also responsible for the vulnerable road safety situation in the country.

It is time the authorities involved in enhancing road safety realises the socio-economic distress that road mishaps are causing and coordinate with each other to resolve the inherent weaknesses in the system that are endangering road safety.

Obtaining a driving license is quite cumbersome and time consuming which is forcing many people to drive without driving licenses or to obtain fake driving licenses. The process of obtaining a driving license should be made transparent, faster and simpler. In addition, drives should be conducted throughout the country regularly to crackdown on drivers driving without a valid driving license. The same is true for fitness certificates.

The law enforcement agencies have stated in the past that due to lack of manpower and tools they are often unable to apprehend the traffic law violators. The authority should increase the resource personnel of the law enforcement agencies such as traffic police and highway police and provide them with necessary tools such as speed guns to measure the speed of running vehicles.

There are many drivers who are speeding and driving recklessly disregarding public safety. Many of these drivers have been responsible for road mishaps in the past but they have never been punished which is motivating them to drive recklessly. These drivers should be brought to justice.

Although the function of a highway is to provide mobility for high speed vehicles or transport vehicles without much interruption, slower and smaller sized vehicles such as rickshaws, auto-rickshaws, vans, tempos etc. are allowed on the highways. This is not only slowing down traffic but making the highways dangerous as drivers of larger vehicles often times have to take evasive action to avoid collisions with slower and smaller sized vehicles; in many instances, they fail, resulting in collision. The authority should ban plying of local transport on the highways and encourage the local people to use local roads.

The writer is Transportation Engineer based in Thailand.

The election that wasn't

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

2014 has ended on the very same note that it had started - with strike and violence. The beginning of 2014 saw the spillover of the violence of 2013 but only briefly, since the thunder that belled from the BNP leadership in December 2013 was full of sound and little else. In fact that the BNP failed to organise a substantive movement against the January 5 election or rally people to force the government to follow through its pre-election statement that the election was only to address the constitutional compulsion and that no sooner was the election held than the AL would start talk regarding the 11th Parliament. For those who did not believe the AL then stands vindicated for their position.

It was prudence perhaps which forced them to abstain from any further agitational programme. And that may have been construed by many as being an acceptance of a fait accompli - of a political situation stemming from a nearly voter less election on January 5, 2014. If it was a battle of attrition between the AL and BNP then it was AL that came out the better of the two with the people still smarting under the effect of the 2013 violence.

Not every country has the pleasure of being presented with an election at the very start of the year. And if it is like the one that we saw on January 5, the government determined to hammer it down our throat and the opposition resorting to extreme violence to see that did not happen, then it will remain indelible in our mind for long. Predictably the AL did not relent on the BNP demand for a caretaker government, and was perhaps not too unhappy to see the BNP boycott the elections.

It was clear that the shenanigans AL resorted to with Ershad and the JP to make them participate in the elections were only to lend the elections a modicum of plausibility and acceptability internationally. After all, there had to be an opposition in the parliament, Ershad needed one in 1988, and he managed a loyal opposition in the 4th Parliament. Sheikh Hasina in 2014 replicated an Ershad

and managed a loyal opposition in the form of Ershad's JP, which some now term jocularly as Jatiyo Party (AL). Banter aside, the one regret that we have is to see regression of politics in the country to the extent that a political party with long traditions of struggle for democracy has to resort to the dubious politics of the military autocrats. However, if what we have today is an apology of parliamentary democracy then the responsibility must also be shared by the BNP who lacked the foresight to see through the AL ploy to keep it out of the parliamentary elections.

For the AL there was perhaps no other alternative, having successfully managed to keep the BNP from the election to stage-manage a poll, that would give it some degree of acceptability. The party was on legally valid ground but lacked a moral base. For the first time more than fifty percent of the Sangsad seats were uncontested and in the rest the voter turn out was abysmally low, although the Election Commission would want us to believe that forty percent voters turned out to chose their candidates on 5 Jan. That the 10th parliamentary elections had failed to meet the minimum criterion to qualify as an acceptable election is not a matter that needed to be proved; it was matter that has been accepted as a fact by most people, at home and abroad.

That the AL will not allow an inch to the BNP is very clear, and that was blatantly demonstrated on 28 December. The Gazipur

episode was only the preview of things to come. Nevertheless, it seems that the more AL dismisses BNP as a political force the more it appears to be occupied with it.

However, what the AL seems to be overlooking is the fact that the demand for a pluralistic dispensation born out of an inclusive and participatory election is not the demand of the BNP alone. And engaging on the matter with the BNP - it being the only other party that matters - is not caving in to BNP demands, but showing respect for the legitimate expectation of a large segment of the voters.

It is only the imprudent and the statesman who will deliberately abridge the tenure of its stay in power, the latter for the sake of bringing in true democracy. What would the AL leaders want to be seen as?

The writer is Editor, Oped and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

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How useful are primary and junior public examinations?



MANZOOR AHMED

SHOULD we not have a reasonably reliable way of assessing what students learn in primary and secondary schools and how the schools and teachers perform? Indeed we should. But the nationwide public examinations at the end of class five and eight is not the right way and the harm caused by it far outweighs any benefit.

The results of this year's public examinations announced on Tuesday and the official hype surrounding it highlight the problems.

Over 5.2 million children sat for the two exams; 97.9% and 90.5% passed respectively at the primary and junior secondary levels. Of those who passed, 7.5% were declared to be in the super-achiever category with grade point average (GPA) 5. The rest were in the GPA 4 or lower category. What does this mean in respect of student learning and performance of the education system?

Not much. The exams are for all the various subjects taught in primary and junior levels and are based on certain specified contents of the textbook. The exams test the capacity of students to memorise and reproduce the texts rather than to demonstrate actual skills and competencies of reading, writing and mathematics.

The Directorates of Primary Education and Secondary Education, faced with the question of providing evidence of competencies of students, have been carrying out sample surveys of students at grade levels 3, 5 and 8. The survey results, not publicised much, are revealing. The 2013 national student assessment sample survey showed that only a quarter of the students in grade five achieved the competencies specified in the curriculum. At grade level 8, 44% in Bangla and 35% in math achieved the designated competencies.

The assessment results are in sharp contrast to the primary completion and JSC exam results. No amount of arguments about the differences between the assessment and the public examination can explain away the contradiction.

The education authorities, question-setters, schools and teachers, all seem to have found a way to show good results in the examination. The public exams also have given a new boost to the private coaching business.

There are more serious concerns than the fact that the tests measure only the students' ability to memorise cer-

tain textbook content rather than their skills and competencies. The exams have been made high-stake for no useful purpose. They place a heavy psychological burden on the students and their parents. They declare a small proportion of the 10-year old children to be super-performers and undermine the self-esteem and confidence level of the rest.

The exams compel teachers and schools to divert their efforts to prepare children for the tests rather than guide them to really learn the basics in literacy and numeracy as well as thinking and reasoning.

A high stake public examination with competitive grading of students at the primary level is not the practice in the rest of the world any longer. Assessment is undertaken basically at the school level. Many countries do have a system of assessing core competencies through standardised tests. But these tests are used for diagnosing the performance of schools and teachers and not for public grading of individual students.

National Education Policy 2010 emphasised competency-based assessment of learning, moving away from memorisation, school-based continuing evaluation of students, and upazila-based assessment of system performance. The policy proposed only one national public examination for school education at the end of secondary education after grade 12.

When the primary education completion examination was introduced in 2010 and the Junior Secondary exam in 2012, many educationists expressed their concern about it. The objections did not receive a fair hearing. Decision-making in our education system is often dependent on individual predilections of political and bureaucratic personalities rather than a thorough technical and professional consideration of pros and cons in the particular context of Bangladesh, taking account of international experience.

What should be done now? The two ministries for school education (another anomaly not found anywhere else) should jointly convene an expert meeting about the steps to be taken to make school-based assessment of learning at primary and junior level effective. The meeting also should consider ways of making schools and teachers answerable for their performance without penalising students. National student assessment that has been ongoing every two years can show the way for this purpose.

The writer is Professor Emeritus at BRAC University.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Inefficiency, arrogance and a tragedy

How on earth the police could confine Nasir Fakir for twelve hours? Interestingly, the police authorities have not on their own questioned the Police Station in-charge concerned! Now under pressure, they are arranging an in-house inquiry (?) or an in-house cover-up! This is an example of how the taxpayers' money is being wasted by the police and other authorities like the Fire Brigade.

Do the police believe that the bereaved Fakir was lying to the press reporter? The uncalled-for harassment of Nasir Fakir by the 'thana' officials is something that the government should not take lightly. The Fire Brigade's bungled rescue attempts only showed how incompetent they were, as later a few volunteers succeeded in recovering the body in their first attempt! This matter must be thoroughly investigated by an independent high powered body and punishment must be given to the incompetent officials.

A taxpayer
Dhaka

Inhumane police!

When frantic efforts were on to pull out Jihad from the depth of the pipe and his parents were anxiously waiting for their child's rescue, how come the police took his father to the station and kept him there for 12 hours? How insensitive of them that instead of coming to their help, the police inflicted mental torture upon them by asking them unnecessary questions! If the police had something to know from Jihad's father, they could go to his residence. The police officials involved in this should be rightly served.

A. H. Dewan
South Kafrul, Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

Can '71's spirit and corruption go together?

As Bangladesh celebrates its 43rd Victory Day, we see a new band of patriotic (fake!) people who want us to believe that they love Bangladesh more than anything else. They change their FB profile picture into the national flag in December and do everything to show that they are patriots. But Bangladesh is known as one of the most corrupt countries in the world with no rule of law. Corrupt people are holding top positions in society.

I just wonder how a country with so many patriotic people lacks good governance and the rule of law. Maybe corruption and '71 spirit go together in this part of the world.

Matiur rahman
Sydney
Australia

Comments on news report, "Detained with good intent!" published on December 29, 2014

New Generation

This is one of many grave misfortunes the nation has been encountering in recent times.

P.K Sharma

The nation needs revolution to bring back the lost democracy.

Saleh Tanveer

"Detained with good intent" -- wonder how it could bring any good to a person worried to death about the fate of his son. In Bangladesh "good intent" has been redefined to be whatever the authorities do.

"BCL men not seen there" (Dec. 26, 2014)

Ishtiaque Ahmed

Everyone doubts the credibility of the statements made by Asaduzzaman Khan and Mahbulul Alam Hanif.

"Rupali too gives Beximco relief" (Dec. 26, 2014)

OpeeMonir

It seems that there is no accountability in the country and people have lost their voice in challenging anything that seems to be improper. How can the bank reschedule such huge amount for 10 more years?

"Step by step, Modi designs a foreign policy" (December 28, 2014)

Kautilya

Thank you for an outsider's view of Modi and his policies. If one were to listen only to the Indian press, one would be faulted for the impression that Modi is the worst that has happened to India since its Independence and he is absolutely taking the country down the path of utter destruction and ruin. So thank you again for a different perspective; it is refreshing as much as it is comforting to know that the people of India have finally taken a chance on a more prosperous future!