

SSC examinees' future in peril

Call off indefinite blockade

As many as 14 lakh SSC examinees and their guardians will have to bear the brunt of the ongoing political turmoil from February 2 if the BNP does not call off its country-wide blockade. The students, whose coaching and last minute preparations have undeniably been hampered due to the volatile political situation, now face an uncertain future, with the SSC exams scheduled to begin in less than a week and no assurance from the opposition that the blockade will be called off anytime soon.

We echo the concerns of millions of examinees and their guardians who find themselves in a helpless position. Even though the ministry officials state that they are prepared to hold the tests on time, how, in these violent times in which even students are not spared, are we to guarantee the safety of examinees to and from their exam venues? The situation is even more dire for students in rural areas whose exam centres are several miles away.

Meanwhile, postponement of exams under the current circumstances does not seem like a viable option. After all, can we postpone the exams indefinitely, in tune with the opposition's programmes?

The academic calendar for millions of children has already been adversely affected at the start of 2015. Thousands of O and A level examinees have already lost out, as some of their examinations were cancelled as a result of hartals.

We urge the opposition to call off the blockade at least till the SSC exams are completed and allow some normalcy to return to the lives of our future generation.

New BB loan restructuring policy

Address root cause of default first

AIMED at banks to get a repayment on big borrowers worth more than Tk. 500 crore, the new loan restructuring policy being introduced by the central bank, allows for repayment over a 12-year period. The downside is that shareholders of such companies will be deprived of any dividend for the first three years. Companies must set aside an amount equivalent to 2 per cent of their income to qualify for the loan restructuring offer. The new policy is being touted as a necessary measure to help bank clients who failed to repay loans on a timely basis due to political turmoil and other unavoidable circumstances. What economists fear is that such a policy coming into effect without addressing the root cause requiring restructuring and putting in place appropriate reforms may expose it to abuse and solvency of the banks to a new risk.

Whilst central bank officials opine that the policy will assist in returning profitability to banks by bringing about a reduction on classified loans, where are the measures that should be tackling defaulters to recover untold millions that have been "borrowed" and not paid back in the various scams that rocked the financial system in 2012? Public money has been siphoned off and faith in financial governance has been shaken through these incidences. Now we are looking at ways to reduce the portfolio of classified loans by giving even more time instead of taking concrete measures to rekindle public confidence in the banking sector.

Implications of US-India nuclear deal

ABDUL MATIN

INDIA did not sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and exploded its first nuclear weapon in 1974. Consequently, the United States stopped supply of nuclear materials to India in 1978. For thirty years, there was no cooperation between the two countries on uses of atomic energy. Subsequently, India developed its indigenous nuclear industry.

The US signed a historic deal with India in 2008 to resume supply of nuclear technology and materials. The treaty was inoperative for more than six years for two reasons: (i) insistence of Washington on tracking of nuclear materials and (ii) the supplier's liability in the event of a nuclear accident.

The recent nuclear deal between India and the US removes both the hurdles and paves the way for US suppliers to build nuclear power plants in India. According to the deal, the US will not track nuclear materials in India but the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will apply safeguards to all of its civilian nuclear installations.

At present, all international conventions make the operators of nuclear power plants liable for damages, regardless of the cause of the accident. The maximum liability of the operator is usually limited to \$300 million. The state takes responsibility for damages exceeding this limit. It may be noted that the costs of damages are likely to exceed \$100 billion in both the nuclear disasters in Chernobyl and Fukushima.

Failing to get adequate compensation from the plant supplier after the world's worst industrial disaster in Bhopal in 1984, Indian parliament passed the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damages Act, 2010 which makes suppliers of equipment liable for nuclear damages. Russia, which built two nuclear power reactors in Kudankulam in India, agreed to accept the supplier's liability for building two more reactors at the same site.

Under the new deal, the US agreed to provide insurance coverage for nuclear damages to the suppliers of nuclear power plants. Since the US ban, Russia had been the only foreign supplier of nuclear power plants to India. Now, the USA is ready to enter into this lucrative market. France may also follow the suit. The participation of the western suppliers may encourage competition and result in a positive impact on both quality and costs of nuclear power plants in India.

India plans to build 14,600 MWe nuclear capacity by 2020 and aims to increase the share of nuclear electricity from 1.8% to 25% by 2050. India now generates 255,000 MW electricity with coal supplying 60%. This makes India the world's third producer of carbon dioxide, next to China and US. By increasing the share of nuclear electricity, India will reduce the production of carbon dioxide, which is believed to be responsible for global warming and climate changes.

The writer is a senior nuclear engineer.

Democracy now a blood sport



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN ndc, psc (Retd)

"DEMOCRACY does not have to be a blood sport; it can be an honourable enterprise that advances the public interest." So said a former US president; but that is not so in Bangladesh. Here the *demos* in the *demos*-*kratos* have gone missing. What we have seen in the last one month can be termed as *demos*-*aima*, people's blood rather than people's rule. Some scholars have argued that in some respects democracy is violence-driven. We don't have to go far to fetch examples of it from outside our country.

The moot question is, how does one characterise what we are seeing today in the name of political programmes like blockade?

It is not as if such instances of violent acts did not occur in this country in the past. But the intensity of current violence has far surpassed those of the past and the casualty figures have gone up manifold. Soft targets, particularly civilians, are being made objects of attacks. And to say that these are the work of government agents cannot wash with the public.

Neither Bangladesh, nor for that matter the subcontinent that we were once an integral part of, is new to political violence. Violence was an instrument to compel the colonial power to relinquish authority. It was meant to terrorise the British and the targets were the rulers and their establishments and cohorts that helped perpetuate British rule in India. But these were random rather than widespread in nature. However, it was not violence in the ultimate analysis that forced the British to leave the country, but a more powerful weapon of non-violence.

It is quite another matter that the revolutionary nationalists did not succeed, and that India's independence did not come as a result of an armed revolutionary movement. The credit for that is only Bangladesh's where freedom came after an armed struggle. Even during the months preceding March of 1971 it was never the people or public property that was targeted as a part of the movement.

The government's quandary as to how to address the current situation is exposed by the comments of some ministers, who referred to the Naxals. It came in the context of the government efforts to end the spate of current

violence citing the example of the Naxalites being put down by force by the Indian security forces. The Naxals, who were Maoists, were crushed in 1971, but their ideology survives in other parts of eastern India that feed on Maoist ideology. And Maoists are acknowledged as greater threat to India than the Islamic extremists. Their political demands still hold good.

It would be misplaced to compare BNP with the Naxals and draw the success of the Indian security forces in order to devise similar course of action to address the current situation by force alone. The comparison, nonetheless, betrays AL's intention to equate the BNP with militant or extremist groups, and project it as such. AL's cause to some extent is beefed up by the fact that BNP's major partner Jamaat is seen as the main perpetrator of violence, which is disposed towards hostility with little at stake for it in the safety of the people. And one cannot be faulted for seeing the current method employed to wreak violence as mimicking the tactic of insurgent groups.

The aim of an insurgent group is to inculcate fear through terror among the populace, and expose the inability of the government to provide security to the public. The targets are soft and are randomly selected in the initial phase, just like what we have seen in the last one month where public transports have been attacked with petrol bombs, a handy weapon of arsonists. And the attacks were mostly carried out at night using hit and run tactic.

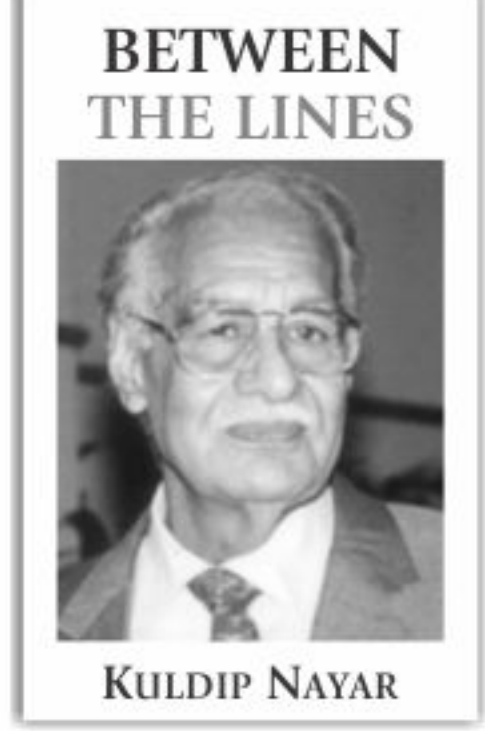
It is hard to say who is in charge of the BNP these days. But its policymakers must immediately order its activists to stop the violence if it wants to retain any degree of public support to its cause. They must understand that violence will detract the validity of BNP's political demands. However, it would be wrong to think that that will provide political mileage to the AL. The more the public sufferings the more the public opinion will go against the BNP. But that does not necessarily mean that it will go in favour of the AL. Failure to stem this will only sap public trust in the government, but at the same time a *carte blanche* 'shoot at sight' is not the answer.

To me the current state seems to be a cruel manifestation of political violence, where terror tactics is being used to attain a bargaining position. The matter is compounded by an impervious government. And where might this lead to? Let us leave that for next week.

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

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Tilt towards America



KULDIP NAYAR

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi must be regretting that he invited President Barack Obama for the Republic Day. The latter made no secret of demolishing the Bhartiya Janata Party's 'ghar wapsi' slogan and the other programmes related to Hindutva ideology. He reminded India of its commitment to religious freedom, consecrated in the constitution.

A more charitable explanation can be that Modi wanted his Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) to know what the democratic world thought about its new zeal for a Hindu Rashtra. Whatever the case, the BJP has got such a rebuke that it will be difficult for the party to show its face in the democratic world.

President Obama reminded the Indian nation that it can succeed so long as it is not splintered along religious lines and allowed people to freely "profess, practice and propagate" religion. Whether the BJP has liked his frank statement or not, the nation as a whole is happy that a leader like Obama has reminded the country of its pluralistic ethos. Some BJP leaders are upset because they have been hinting at building the Ram temple at the site where the demolished Babri Masjid stood.

The visit of President Obama has some other fall-out regarding India's status in international affairs. Probably realising this, one Pakistani television channel telephoned me to sum up the outcome of Obama's visit. I said in reply: A tilt towards America to the chagrin of China. Let me explain.

Even during the Cold War when New Delhi was leading the non-alignment movement, its deference to Moscow was apparent. Since India provided a stable and reliable channel to the Soviet Union, Washington would take New Delhi's tilt in its stride.

Today, Moscow is neither strong nor commands support from what was then Eastern Europe. True, President Vladimir Putin has put a strong foot forward. But he is conscious of his limitations. Ukraine's standard of revolt is one example. America's support to it is open and public. So much so, a question to President Obama at his press conference at Delhi brought his strong support to Ukraine without any ifs or buts.

Prime Minister Modi, a post-cold war leader, is conscious of America's military and economic prowess, compared to weak Russia's. He is also pragmatic enough to bring that in consideration when looking ahead. He has cautiously moved towards America knowing well which side of the bread is buttered. It may soon be followed by proximity with Australia and Japan. These two countries are already on the American side.

Washington seems to have no doubt in its thinking that its real adversary is Beijing. America cannot find a better partner than a larger and economically burgeoning India. That is the reason why Beijing has reacted adversely to President Obama's visit and has warned India not to be taken in by America's overtures. New Delhi is sensitive to China's sensitivities. Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj is herself going to Beijing to assure it that India's friendship with America is not at the expense of China.

Beijing is not naïve about the possible dangers. It

understands that India is the only power in the region which can challenge China. True, its 1962 victory against India is a heady wine which still intoxicates Beijing. But it also knows that New Delhi has come a long way since. It realises that New Delhi is militarily stronger and more resourceful than it was in 1962.

Then the non-aligned status of India was a bone of contention with America. Still it responded to Jawaharlal Nehru's request for weapons and air umbrella. It is another thing that Beijing announced a unilateral ceasefire after making pulp of India's military strength and defeating it decisively.

President Obama's visit is a guarantee that India would not be alone if ever such a situation develops again. It can feel secure after his visit. New Delhi tried its best to wean America away from Pakistan. Prime Minister Modi reportedly talked more than once to President Obama, but he could only get support for action against terrorists. There is a separate paragraph to urge Islamabad to bring the perpetrators of 26/11 carnage to justice.

In Washington's scheme of things, Pakistan's support is essential in the war against terrorists. In principle there cannot be any difference on this point. Yet the reality is that Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, urging jihad against us, is openly preaching hatred against India. The Pakistan government-owned railway ran a special train to facilitate travel of his supporters to attend his rally.

On top of it all, there is no serious interest in pursuing the 26/11 attack on Mumbai where some 200 people were killed. Judge after judge has been transferred. There are hearings all over again. Pakistan is afraid of the Taliban inside and outside the country in proceeding with the case, much less taking action against the perpetrators.

President Obama's statement that they should be brought to book makes little sense when he has done nothing to ensure some action. It is obvious that he

does not go beyond a point lest he should embarrass Pakistan. Yet, America is the only country which can force Pakistan to deliver. Pakistan denied that Jammal-ud-Dawa has been banned. Only its back account has been frozen. Washington should exert more pressure.

I wish President Obama would use his good offices to arrange a meeting between India and Pakistan. However divergent their viewpoints are, the two countries might find a way to have trade and tourism. Once the two countries meet, they may find other avenues for cooperation. With trust deficit on the one hand, and no contact with each other on the other, the gulf between the two is bound to grow further.

President Obama's offer to finance solar energy production may prod New Delhi to go for this type of power in a big way. Already, Rajasthan has some plants. Expansion or installation of new ones can produce so much power that it can be transmitted across the border. Pakistan is presently short of power. Washington can pursue President Obama's suggestion and ensure that India share the additional production. There may be other economic avenues which, if followed, can increase India's earning. His personal interest in such projects will not only ensure their early completion but also impress on New Delhi that the economic sinews are the best ties that can bind India and Pakistan together.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Opportunity squandered but all is not lost

The golden opportunity for Bangladesh to resolve the present political deadlock has not been wasted even though the Prime Minister was refused from the gate of BNP's Gulshan office. Rather we see a ray of hope in this effort of the PM

Begum Zia has lost her beloved son. We cannot imagine what shock a mother bears when she loses her child. At the same time it is not fair to impute motives to PM's action. What is important is that the PM rushed there, waited several minutes, and returned after being refused entry.

BNP leadership should keep in mind that PM herself had made a positive move. We are eagerly looking forward to the BNP's taking the right move this time.

Momenur Rahaman Mondol
Shamoli, Dhaka

The locked gate drama

Just a few days ago we first witnessed that the 'gate' was locked from the outside so that 'someone' couldn't exit the premise. Then the 'gate' was locked from the inside so that 'someone' couldn't enter the same premise. What a drama!

These 'someones' are two faces of the same old coin; it needs to be shelved. Let's mint a new coin so that it's useful and acceptable to all.

Ishtiaqueur Rahman
Bashundhara, Dhaka

Why PM's sympathy only for Khaleda Zia?

Arafat Rahman Koko died of cardiac arrest. After that, we saw the PM go to BNP's Gulshan office to offer her condolences to Khaleda Zia (though she was not allowed to enter the BNP office). My question is why offering condolence to Khaleda Zia only? Why not all the mothers of the victims who died due to arson attacks perpetrated by BNP-Jamaat? Because their mothers are not the ex-PMs and ex-opposition leaders?

The mothers of the victims who died in the recent violence deserve the PM's condolences too.

Matiur Rahman
Sydney, Australia

Comments on news report, "Rare gesture, late response," published on January 25, 2015

OpeeMonir
BNP and Khaleda did the right thing; but they could have set an example by handling it in a much better fashion. This is BNP with its political mistakes all along.

Barkat
Politics is strange. Khaleda was almost in house arrest for the last so many days. In retaliation, she called nationwide blockade that caused so many deaths. If one Arafat's death makes Hasina so kind, then why doesn't Hasina meet Khaleda for the sake of 160 million people of Bangladesh? Let's hope, for the sake of millions of ordinary mothers, Hasina will go and meet Khaleda.

Dev Saha
The snub was very much expected. Why ask for it when PM knew she would get one? A formal condolence letter would have been perfectly ok. I do not see anybody scoring any points with this untimely death of a person.

"BNP response under fire at Sangsad" (Jan. 26, 2015)

Name
Couldn't the dirty politics and unnecessary drama to gain political mileage be set aside for a little while, at least to let a mother privately grieve for her son?

Shihab
Politicians try to do ugly politics with every issue.

"A good gesture by PM" (Jan. 26, 2015)

Tushar
Many citizens believe it's a political drama staged once again by the PM, previously by telephone calls and now by visiting the ex-PM's office. Citizens of this country don't forget how the former PM was dragged out of her home and very recently barricaded by trucks and police.

Barkat
If PM is saddened and concerned for one mother Khaleda, then why can't she go for political dialogue to resolve the present crisis for the sake of millions of mothers?

Thanks to Hasina, many senior BNP leaders are languishing in jail on ridiculous charges and also a large number of its decision makers are underground fearing arrest. Hasina went there with pure and sole political intention and Khaleda played the game as well.