

Tofail Ahmed, Minister, Ministry of Commerce and Lt. Gen (Retd) Mahbubur Rahman, Member, BNP Standing Committee, talk to Shamsuddoza Sajen and Sushmita S. Preetha of The Daily Star on the present political situation.

'There is no question of dialogue'

The Daily Star (TDS): The AL-led government has been repeatedly saying that the present political turmoil is a law and order problem not a political problem. So, it has chosen the path of using state machinery to tackle the BNP-led movement. But it seems the situation has improved very little. What do you think?

Tofail Ahmed (TA): I think the situation is much better now than the January 5 election period. In various newspaper reports, we see that situation is normal. We are seeing traffic jam in the capital city. The situation is getting better steadily.

TDS: The government has postponed SSC exam schedule. It is widely reported that the ongoing political gridlock is affecting our economy badly. Still you are saying the situation is normal!

TA: Khaleda Zia is destroying the future of the young generation. That's why she has resorted to such violent programmes of *hartal* and *oborodh* during the SSC exam. We could have held the exam. I myself took the responsibility. I told our honourable prime minister not to shift the date of the exam. But she is a mother. She said if a single student faced any hurdle it would hurt her. So she decided not to hold the exams amid *hartal* and *oborodh*.

Khaleda Zia stopped our children's exam but she sent back her grandchildren for exam in Malaysia even before completion of forty days of their father's death. This cannot be politics.

During the War of Liberation there was a plan to annihilate our intellectuals. Now, Khaleda Zia has planned to do the same by putting the burden of *hartal* on our young generation. In Pakistan, we saw the killing of 141 students in an attack on a school. Here, Khaleda Zia is doing the same.

Now, various global research organisations are saying that Bangladesh is ahead of Pakistan in most of the economic and social indices. We are even ahead of India in some development indices like maternal mortality, child birth rate, longevity and so on. CNN "Money" has said that Iraq, Bangladesh and India are the three countries which will grow most in the next few years. Goldman Sachs projected Bangladesh as one of the next emerging 11. JP Morgan named Bangladesh one of the frontier five. They are saying Bangladesh has achieved tremendous progress;

Bangladesh is a development miracle. Khaleda Zia is trying to destroy this growth. It cannot be called political movement. It is simply terrorism. It is an act of terrorism against the progress and future of Bangladesh.

TDS: You are saying BNP is doing terrorism. Some of your leaders even compared it with various international terrorist organisations. Don't you think it is wrong to equate a political party with terrorist organisation?

TA: We did not call it terrorist organisation. We said that what it is doing is terrorism because they do



not have people's support for their programmes. In our time we also called *hartal* and people supported our call. But in BNP's *hartal* and *oborodh* do you find general people's participation? Even in my district Bhola, everything is normal. At this moment not a single industry is closed. Train, buses and launches are moving normally.

TDS: But the government has given instruction not to run buses after 9pm.

TA: It has been done for people's safety. In Comilla, they hurled a bomb at a bus at midnight and 14 people were burnt to death. They are monsters. They are inhuman. They are taking revenge on general people. It will never succeed.

TDS: How do you see the move by Udbigno Nagorik (concerned citizens)?

TA: Those who have gathered under the banner of Udbigno Nagorik and urged for dialogue have political background. They are not ordinary citizens. We know each of them. They are not the real representatives of the people. They tried to equate BNP with AL. But they are talking about violence after people questioned them as to why they did

not talk about violence or terrorism. They have changed their stance. If someone urges the government to sit with such an evil force after all of their violent activities, then US would have sat with ISIS or Taliban. The civilised world is rather fighting these menaces.

Where were those concerned citizens when, before the January 5 elections, the PM repeatedly called for dialogue and Khaleda Zia refused to sit? Where were those concerned citizens when the PM called Khaleda Zia over phone for dialogue? Now, as the situation is getting normal and BNP is getting into deep crisis, these concerned citizens are urging for dialogue to rescue BNP. It will not work. They will not succeed.

TDS: It is agreed that BNP has to stop violence. But after doing that will you sit for dialogue? Honourable PM herself had talked about midterm elections.

TA: This is completely wrong. She never talked about midterm elections. I challenge. Personally someone can say that. Yes there was a declaration that according to the constitution we have to hold an election before January 24, 2014, and we did that. If we had failed to do that an undemocratic government would have moved in. It happened in Thailand, that's why the army has captured power there. But it did not happen in Bangladesh. It was the determination and efficiency of our prime minister that we held the election. The elections were for five year tenure. So, now, there is no question of dialogue.

TDS: What about UN's move? TA: Mr. Taranco himself refused to come at this moment. Whoever comes, AL will not hold dialogue with any terrorist organisation.

TDS: If BNP-led alliance stops violence?

TA: Why dialogue? We wanted to sit for dialogue to avoid this kind of violence. But they did not listen to our requests. What will we get from this dialogue? Khaleda Zia has given a 7-point demand, none of which is acceptable to us. She asked for caretaker government which is out of the question. She asked for mid-term election, which is also out of question. She asked for many other things, none of which is acceptable to us.

TDS: Do you have any proposal for coming out of this impasse?

TA: I have only one proposal: BNP has to wait till January 29, 2019.

The Daily Star (TDS): The country and its people are literally in flames right now and the economy in dire straits. How much longer will you hold the common people hostage for the sake of your movement?

Mahbubur Rahman: The 20-party alliance is undertaking a movement for a noble cause -- democracy. The last election took place without the mandate of the people. It has been criticised both within and outside the country. The government at the time had said that the election was to maintain a constitutional obligation, and that they would hold dialogue later to discuss a mid-term election. It has been one year, but that hasn't happened yet. Bangladesh has a national ethos, hopes and aspirations. We fought in the Liberation War for independence, for establishment of democracy. The 2014 election has posed a huge crisis for democracy.

A free and fair midterm election has to take place with the participation of all parties. And the sooner that can be resolved, the better. We have been waging a movement for more than a month now, but we are against the ongoing violence. We can never indulge in violence. I am personally very concerned that all of Bangladesh is in flames, that the air is heavy with the cries of people. This is unpardonable. Our movement is non-violent, but it has to be admitted that violence is taking place. We are not doing it, but it is happening. There are many evil forces in this country that have their own agenda. They are causing instability and irreparable damage to the people and the economy. I can understand the concern of the business leaders who are saying that the economy has lost Tk.90,000 crore. We are an LDC. How can we make up for this?

TDS: Can you identify the "evil forces" that you mention that are causing this violence? Isn't it true that many BNP activists have been caught red-handed with petrol bombs etc.?

MR: There are of course evil forces, maybe even within us. Those who indulge in terrorism and terrorist activities exist and are active. But it is the government that is running the country. If things go well, it is to government's credit, and if there is instability, it, too, has to be held accountable. The government says it is tackling the law and order situation with a strong hand, but then why is it failing? If it really wants to address the situation, we, too, will support it. The onus lies on the government to ensure security. I

cannot identify the evil forces, but why can't the government?

The government, instead of targeting only one party, should conduct fair and independent investigations. Just the other day we saw news of police arresting bomb makers, but they were later released when some party (AL) people insisted that they were of good character.

TDS: But you have to agree that it is since you called the *oborodhs* that the violence has escalated? Can your party abjure itself of all responsibility?

MR: In the current context in Bangladesh, it is imperative that



democracy is revived. I am not saying that blockades and *hartals* are the only movement. What other forms of protests are open for us? Rallies and demonstrations are our constitutional rights which are being constantly denied. The government has to rethink this. We want a dialogue, because in a civilised and democratic country, dialogue is the only way to address conflict.

I respect and support the latest civil society initiative. Someone has to mediate, and the UN and many countries are all urging us to sit for dialogue. How can the government say it doesn't accept this initiative? Instead, it says they are architects of 1/11. AL had said it was their movement that had resulted in 1/11, but now they are calling others architects. It's all very contradictory.

TDS: If violence is not your strategy, then what exactly are your activities at the field level? Would it be fair to say that your movement is not garnering widespread public support?

MR: Maybe our activities are not really visible in Dhaka, but outside of Dhaka our presence is very strong. Even the honourable finance minister has admitted that the whole

country has been destabilised. It's not necessary that you see leaders on the streets because they are being repressed and cases are being filed against them. But because of our movement, the country has come to a complete stand-still.

As for public support, it is a matter of time. It's true that 16 crore people are not yet standing up. This means that the nation is also divided. The other reality is that people do not like this violence and neither do I. Politicians must have the best interest of the country in mind and so we cannot indulge in violence.

TDS: You spoke about evil forces and extremism. Many people in the country would associate that with Jamaat. You also spoke about the spirit of the Liberation War earlier. In light of these two issues, how would you justify your association with Jamaat?

MR: BNP has a lot of thoughts on Jamaat. We are well aware of the controversies regarding the party, of its war crimes. We are for the war crimes trial and I am respectful of the verdicts of the court. There isn't a lot of opportunity for confusing Jamaat's position with that of BNP's. BNP is an ideological party. Its founder was a valiant freedom fighter and made huge contributions to the economy and the country. We cherish the spirit of liberation. Jamaat has not been able to reconcile with '71, and it does not have the spirit of liberation. With Jamaat, we have more of a strategic relation, not an ideological one.

TDS: If the government agrees to a dialogue, how much would you be willing to compromise?

MR: It has become clear that we want a fair, free and participatory election that is accepted by all. In the classical sense, we are not saying that a caretaker government is a must for this. The point of a caretaker government is to ensure fair elections. If that can be ensured through a different mechanism, we will welcome it. But the main condition is -- election.

TDS: If the government agrees to sit in dialogue with BNP under the condition that you sever your ties with Jamaat, would you consider it?

MR: But my question is why should Jamaat be given such importance? It is a small party; we shouldn't give it too much importance and let it go to their heads. Besides, if the government can prove that Jamaat is associated with terrorist activities then it can take appropriate action.

"Burmese Days"

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILJA ALI

ences and impressions. Today, travel narratives are out of fashion because of the instant and concise information available on the internet. However, I believe the latter can never match the insights provided by a traveller with a social conscience and a flair for grasping the cultural undertones.

These thoughts often crossed my mind during my recent visit to Myanmar -- a country that was a mixed experience for me. To a casual visitor Myanmar appears to be an exotic blend of golden pagodas, monks in maroon robes, heavily scented

tropical flowers and women in colourful sarongs. A different perspective begins to emerge as one takes a closer look beyond the obvious to compare and contrast human behaviour and social systems.

The country's majestic pagodas with their awe-inspiring Buddha statues were truly impressive. This is perhaps the only country where one can find pagodas in every nook and cranny with all forms of Buddhas -- reclining, meditating and "enlightened." The remarkable feature of these old monuments and sculptures is that they are ornately decorated and covered with gold leaf donated by worshippers. The Burmese rank high in terms of charity, most of which is directed to temples and monasteries with the expectation of earning credit for the next incarnation. The level of religious exuberance can be gauged by the 76-carat diamond adorning the crest of the most sacred Buddhist monument in Myanmar -- the Shwe Dagon in Yangon. It was donated by a 19th century king, although the pagoda was built between the 6th and 10th century CE. Even the common people spend their meager savings to anoint the Buddha

with gold leaf, in the hope that their prayers will be answered in exchange for the offering. The rich and wealthy donate generously and are given special access to the inner chambers of the sanctuaries. Unfortunately, this wealth-based privilege ends up creating a hierarchy that I believe is antithetical to the core belief of Buddhism.

In Burmese society, the monks are ubiquitous and represent an important power base. A visit to a monastery in the old capital of Amarapura was revealing: there was an underlying tension between the monks' stoic life and the temporal world. Watching the monks lined up with their heads bowed, their begging bowls ready to receive the midday meal offered by local residents was a humbling experience. But the feeling was somewhat dampened when a wealthy donor arrived with an entire film crew recording his act of distributing food -- unabashedly seeking public acclaim for this "charitable deed."

I must confess that the opulence of most Buddhist sites and rituals troubled my conscience. Ever since my youth I have nurtured a deep admiration and reverence for Prince

Siddhartha who, more than 2,500 years ago, gave up the luxuries of his palace and left his wife and infant son to seek a way of life that would alleviate human suffering. According to historical legend, after years of ascetic living and intense meditation he found his answer and transformed into the Buddha (the enlightened). He preached that each one of us could achieve spiritual harmony by discarding our egos and material cravings and following a path of compassion and humility. It was thus incomprehensible to me how an expensive gift to a pagoda or the public display of charity could bring someone a step closer to enlightenment!

But then, who am I to judge? After all, religious customs and rituals, even beliefs, change and mutate to suit the culture and traditions of a society. Perhaps the Burmese, through centuries, have learned to find a fine balance between their mundane daily lives and their seemingly grandiose religious practices. I observed that despite the inherent contradiction between the ostentatious religious sites and the stark poverty among a large segment of the population,

there was a tranquil resignation in the attitudes of the common people. The smiling faces of the women selling vegetables in local markets, the unreserved surrender of the devotees in temples and the languid pace of the village folks seemed to indicate that people had found a level of spiritual equilibrium, in spite of many years of political repression and social injustices.

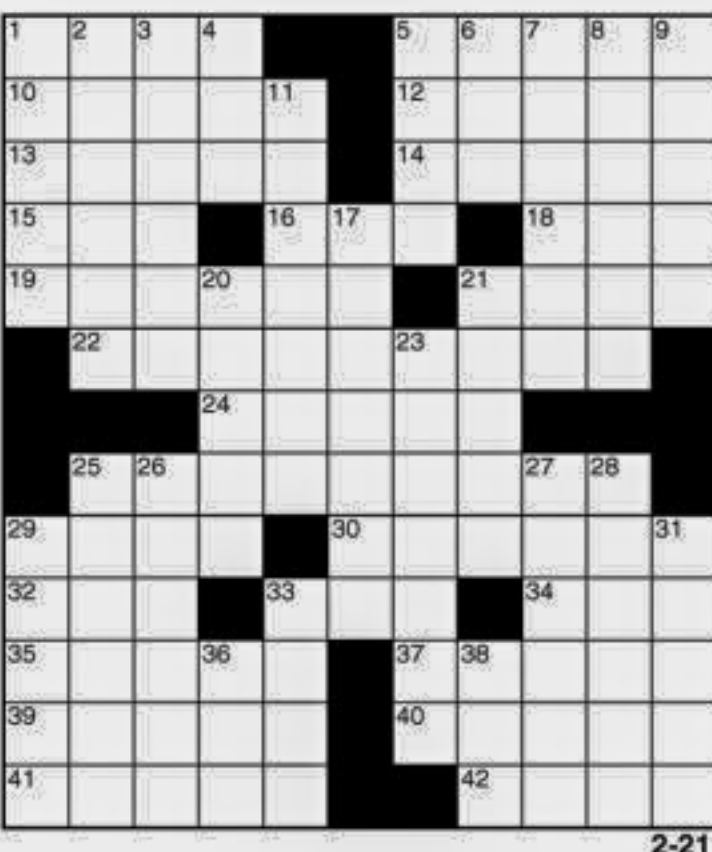
I was especially touched when a passerby stopped me to adjust the string of my straw hat falling off my head. It was done naturally, with no expectation of a reward. The little act of kindness made me realise that compassion does not have to be a great deed of charity -- it can manifest itself in little ways. The fact remains that not all of us are destined to attain Nirvana as Buddha defined it. But through small acts of giving we can make our world more connected in a way that no religious discourse can.

This is the core lesson I carried back from Myanmar.

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CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS
- 1 Mexican peninsula
- 5 Accolade
- 10 Island greeting
- 12 Not out of it
- 13 Homer work
- 14 Amber, essentially
- 15 Load unit
- 16 Turky wood
- 18 Stake in
- 19 Hits the campaign trail
- 21 Hamlet, for one
- 22 "Say what you're trying to say"
- 24 Red Square name
- 25 Fight
- 29 Grant of films
- 30 Aslan's place
- 32 Ball
- 33 Hoss's pa
- 34 Application form box
- 35 Blown away
- 37 Not available
- 39 Sheet material
- 40 Seasonal song
- 41 Horse
- 42 Stock holders
- DOWN
- 1 Prepares the hook
- 2 Portions out
- 3 Enlist
- 4 Cry of insight
- 5 "Listen!"
- 6 Need to pay
- 7 Cruise port
- 8 Fix one's bearings
- 9 Zellweger of "Chicago"
- 11 Birth parent seeker
- 17 Foolish
- 20 Like some opals
- 21 Generous one
- 23 Rediscovery of
- 1985
- 25 "Rats!"
- 26 Polished
- 27 Hesitant
- 28 Attaches, as a feed bag
- 29 Spring feature
- 31 Skating spins
- 33 Show flexibility
- 36 Lilliputian
- 38 Afternoon break



CRYPTOQUOTE
ODVCV'P OXM OFNVP ME SVTC EMC NV:
EMMORTKK PVTPMH, THA XTFOFHI EMC
EMMORTKK PVTPMH.

-- ATCFJP CJZUVC

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:
IT'S ALL RIGHT TO LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, BUT IT'S
WISER TO LOOK ON BOTH SIDES.

-- OLD PROVERB

Yesterday's answer

PASTA VISTA
ETHAN ASHES
THANK CLANS
NOR LUCERNE
AMP EPI PIT
PEST SNIDE
HER EAR
CODED METS
BOO GAS SEA
ENTRANT SAY
STEER OBESE
ERRED RARER
TASKS MASTS

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.

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

