

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Holding the government hostage Transportation abstention called off

THE latest transportation abstention in the city forces us to write yet another editorial on the matter. After exhaustive negotiations between the government and trade unions, the following was agreed upon: BRTA would stop its drive against buses overcharging in the name of "seating service" for 15 days, but these buses would comply with BRTA fare charts. Meanwhile, BRTA's mobile court drive will continue. Another meeting is scheduled to take place after this time period to decide whether authorities will take legal action against these bus services.

Dhaka residents had been forced to spend inordinate hours waiting on roads in the vain hope of struggling to get on overcrowded buses. In the midst of all this chaos, we were greeted by reports of the minister for Roads and Bridges expressing his helplessness to resolve the situation. While commuters in general will surely heave a sigh of relief, it is now obvious that some of the leading transport union leaders are also policymakers of the government – men of immense influence and political clout. The two weeks period that was agreed upon brings a very short respite for both commuters and authorities. We hope BRTA will remain firm and take drastic action should errant bus owners fail to stick to what has been agreed upon.

The crux of the problem remains the presence of people in government who hold powerful portfolios in ministries and are at the same time union leaders. There is conflict of interest and if we are even remotely interested in salvaging the transport sector from the rule of syndicates, then this requires the government to take steps against these vested elements within its ranks.

Violence over a swimming pool?

Interference in public works must stop

THE idea that a full-fledged battle can take place over the construction of a swimming pool seems bizarre but that is what happened at the Outer Stadium of MA Aziz Stadium in Chittagong on Tuesday. We are shocked that such a violent clash could take place with members of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) trying to vandalise the construction works of the said swimming pool. The confrontation between the law enforcers and activists turned ugly leaving at least 15 people, including two policemen, injured.

That the Chittagong Divisional Sports Association (CDSA) should be constructing a swimming pool in an adjacent area of the stadium seems to be a routine job for such a body. But why would several hundred members of the AL's student wing gather outside the Outer Stadium demanding that such construction be stopped? It is bewildering why the construction of a swimming pool, plausibly for the purpose of providing an extra facility to athletes and the public, would become the cause of such vehement protest that developed into violence and destruction.

It has been reported that the whole episode has been the result of intraparty feuding between two stalwarts of the ruling party which leaves the public feeling helpless and disillusioned. It is about time that the government reined in the unruly elements in the AL that are interfering with development works and security of the public with their total disregard for the rule of law. The public image of the ruling party is also at stake.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The plight of passengers

The BRTA and the officials of the concerned ministry are requested to take a look at a photograph published on the last page of *The Daily Star's* April 18 issue to get a glimpse of how much we are suffering as a result of the public transport system chaos. In our opinion, before implementing the drive, the government and concerned authorities should have foreseen the possibility of this reaction on the part of the transport owners, and arranged precautions against a shortage of public transport on the roads. Due to the unpreparedness on the part of the authorities, it is the regular people who are facing the harsh consequences. The authorities must look into the issue immediately.

Sirajul Islam
Paribagh

Horrible waste makes travelling to Tangail difficult

The Tangail bound road close to Pabna bypass is covered by a massive volume of solid waste. All Tangail bound passengers have to endure the horrible stench of the garbage, which makes breathing openly in the area almost impossible. Some are even forced to the point of nausea. We would like to draw the attention of the Tangail municipal office to this issue. What measures can be taken to relieve the area from this horrible situation?

Elias Hosen
By email

Which is the "civilised world"?

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEEDUL ANAM KHAN
NDC, PSC (RETD)

This article has been animated by a comment of Sean Spicer, the constantly self-destructing White House press secretary. And that was related to Syrian President Assad's alleged use of sarin gas on April 4, 2017 on his own people. He had said, "The rest of the civilised world stands strong with the United States in condemning these acts." That particular comment followed the US attack on a Syrian airbase as a retaliation of the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun City which killed 102 and injured 405 people. We are told that the pictures of children writhing in agony after the chemical attack had moved President Trump enough to wheel 180 degrees from his earlier expressed policy of not behaving as the world's policeman to launch a short crisp attack on the Syrian airbase from where the attack was launched.

Trump's action, according to the US President himself, was meant to convey a message, which was that the use of a prohibited weapon would not go unpunished nor would the deaths of the innocent civilians caused by the attack. One cannot contest the intrinsic moral strength of the argument. No civilian deaths can be condoned, least of all by the 'civilised world'.

And that is what begs the question. What exactly is the 'civilised world' that Spicer is talking about? Is it the one that is carrying out the verdict of the judge, jury and executioner - the US government - through the pervasive use of drones in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, to pick off Taliban, al-Qaeda and IS leadership, killing innumerable harmless people including a large number of women and children whose deaths are written off unashamedly as collateral damage? How come the perpetrators of these deaths are never called, but continue to dictate an extremely distorted world order? Or the ones that bomb hospitals and escape with the excuse that it was an error of judgment on the part of the pilot? Who is a part of the 'civilised world' the White House press secretary is referring to? And what if that 'civilised world' uses prohibited weapons and indulges in bombings that kill innocent civilians?

To jog our memory, on October 3, 2015 a United States Air Force gunship attacked a trauma centre operated by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the city of

Kunduz in northern Afghanistan. Reportedly, at least 42 people were killed and over 30 were injured. And that in spite of the MSF having notified the warring parties of the hospital's location. The MSF thinks that the airstrike was deliberate—amounting to a breach of international humanitarian law and a war crime. The US military disagrees saying it happened in an environment of war forgetting that even in war targeting civilians is a crime.

The expressed reason for the airstrike by the US military was to defend US forces

a mosque in Mosul. The US command in Iraq, which has acknowledged carrying out a strike against militants in the area, had said, "If we did it, and I'd say there's at least a fair chance that we did, it was an unintentional accident of war." So the lives of 200 innocent people are written off as casualties of "accidents of war." And the casualty figure in this bombing is a good deal more than that caused by the sarin gas attack.

The US is known also to have used prohibited munitions like the cluster bomb and depleted uranium weapons,

NGO Airwars, that monitors strikes in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, found that nearly 1,800 people were allegedly killed by US-led coalition airstrikes last month alone.

Would it be wrong to draw an equivalence between these two instances of killings, notwithstanding the fact that those occurred under different sets of circumstances? How is it that only one is held to account and punished? No deaths can be condoned, whether inflicted by 'uncivilised' or 'civilised' worlds.

Our intention is not to justify al-



Smoke plumes rise after an airstrike in west Mosul on March 10, 2017, as Iraqi forces advance in the city during the ongoing battle to seize it from the Islamic State.

PHOTO: ARIS MESSINIS / AFP/GETTY IMAGES

on the ground, having been requested by Afghan forces who had come under Taliban fire. The irony of it is that while the US Force Commander in Afghanistan admitted that the attack was a mistake, the cockpit recordings revealed that the gunship crew had questioned the legality of the strike which gives the lie to the claim that the attack was a mistake. The US got off with a mere apology and a promise of 'condolence payment', whatever that means.

Most recently, in March this year, a US drone attack killed around 200 civilians in

the latter most recently in 2015 in Syria against the IS. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, the Geneva Conventions of 1925 and 1949 and the Nuremberg Charter of 1945 have affirmed five categories of acts that are prohibited under international law. The use of cluster bombs is prohibited under two categories while the use of depleted uranium weapons is prohibited under all five categories.

Reportedly, there has been a spike in civilian deaths by US bombings since Trump took office. The British-based

Qaeda's or IS' or Assad's despicable deeds which must be suppressed, but to restate the double standards that is applied in dealing with issues of similar nature.

Are deaths by US bombing of lesser impact than those caused by the IS or al-Qaeda or Assad? What Assad is allegedly doing through the use of banned substances the 'civilised world' is doing with 'legal' munitions. Both cause death. But we shall never know which is the less painful. Alas! The dead cannot speak.

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The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Erdogan's Pyrrhic Victory



SOLI ÖZEL

TURKISH voters had a clear-cut choice when they cast ballots on Easter Sunday in a referendum on 18 constitutional amendments already approved by the National Assembly. A "Yes" vote would change their country's political system and usher in a new era in Turkish history. More than a century of parliamentarism would be replaced by an alla turca presidential system that is tailor-made for the current incumbent, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Given Turkey's considerable experience in writing constitutions, most legal experts deem the amendments, which voters endorsed by a razor-thin margin, regressive at best. Those who drafted them seem to have ignored 150 years of Turkish history,

party. The National Assembly – the Turkish Republic's founding institution – will lose many of its powers, and its capacity to serve as a check on the president will be severely curtailed, because the president can dissolve it at any time.

Moreover, changes in how judges are appointed will give the president decisive power over the judiciary, too. The judiciary's already-fragile independence will be further weakened, and the separation of powers will become meaningless.

Despite the referendum's high stakes – the abandonment of the Turkish Republic's longstanding political framework – there was no serious or extended debate prior to the vote, which was held under the state of emergency imposed by Erdoğan in the wake of last July's coup attempt. And at the same time that Turkey undergoes far-reaching political change, Erdoğan will seek to advance a project of social transformation aimed at erasing a Westernising legacy

campaign, avoided any real discussion of what the constitutional-reform package would entail, instead merely promising that it would enhance Turkey's greatness.

Erdoğan had almost the entire state apparatus – including provincial governors and much of the national and local bureaucracy – at his service during the campaign. The government lavished all

The referendum's outcome is almost certain to aggravate Turkey's domestic and international challenges, which have been mounting since the July coup attempt.



"No" supporters march to submit their petition to call for the annulment of a referendum that approved sweeping constitutional changes boosting President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's powers, claiming blatant vote-rigging had swung the result, on April 18, 2017 in Istanbul.

PHOTO: AFP/YASIN AKGUL

not to mention the most fundamental lessons of liberal democracy.

The political system that will be operational in 2019, after parliamentary and presidential elections that year, will abolish the post of prime minister and concentrate executive power in the hands of a president who also leads a political

that dates back to the late-Ottoman era.

The amendments were approved after a relentless campaign of obfuscation, misrepresentation, and vilification. Opponents were accused of associating with terrorists, and Western officials, particularly European Union leaders, were openly attacked. But Erdoğan, who led the

segments of Turkish society with economic incentives and state largesse, and the pro-government media was thoroughly mobilised to support the "Yes" campaign with absurdly sensational, one-sided coverage. Most other media outlets chose, or were forced, to provide toothless coverage.

In addition to this state-led campaign, "No" campaigners were subjected to at least 200 documented attacks, some of them violent. Members of the Kurdish-based Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – including its two co-chairs, other party officials, and various local administrators – have been in jail since November.

On the day of the vote, a controversial decision by Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council concerning the acceptability of ballots that lacked the official stamps on the back heightened worries about voting irregularities and cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the result – which is now being strongly, albeit futilely, contested. All told, the campaign and vote fell far short of established international standards, as election monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have pointed out.

Still, Erdoğan's narrow win could turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory, given how bitterly divided the country has become. The "No" vote was concentrated in Turkey's economic hubs, such as its western and southern coastal region, and

the predominantly Kurdish southeast, as well as in its two largest cities, Istanbul and the capital, Ankara. Of Turkey's 20 most economically important cities, voters in 13, accounting for 62 percent of total national income, voted predominantly against the constitutional reforms. And, because these cities represent the bulk of Turkey's economic and cultural output, they are host to the country's most educated segments.

By contrast, the "Yes" camp comprised all but a few of Turkey's least educated, economically insignificant, rural, insular, and conservative provinces. This is not in keeping with the forward-looking agenda that has always brought Erdoğan political success in the past. It is telling – symbolically and politically – that the amendments' opponents carried Istanbul, where Erdoğan came to the national stage as mayor-elect in 1994.

Erdoğan was visibly shaken by the narrowness of the result – and the breakdown of support that underpinned it. But, as the master of the political game in Ankara, he will try to shape the agenda, and remain on his current course, by relying on domestic polarisation and, perhaps, daring foreign adventures. He has given no indication that he will try to ameliorate the country's tensions. On the contrary, he has suggested that he will reintroduce the death penalty – a move that would bar Turkey from joining the EU.

The referendum's outcome is almost certain to aggravate Turkey's domestic and international challenges, which have been mounting since the July coup attempt. The good news is that the strong showing by the amendments' opponents, and their ability to mobilise through alternative media and micro-organisations, even while under duress, has shown that Turkish civil society remains vibrant.

But this is just the beginning. Those who want to prevent Turkey from falling into the trap of electoral authoritarianism must now form a new political space and furnish leadership alternatives. If they do not, Erdoğan will win the 2019 presidential election – and move quickly to use his newly expanded power in ways that will be far more difficult to combat.

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