

Free hajj for govt officials!

The logic eludes us

AMIDST the chaos surrounding hajj this year, the government has decided to spend a whopping Tk 10.15 crore, not to ease the plight of pilgrims who are in limbo due to visa complications, but to send 318 "pious Muslims" that include government officials and lawmakers who are financially solvent!

It has been reported that priority was given to those from Mymensingh, Gopalganj, Kishoreganj and Faridpur. Going by this logic, one would have to believe that the most "pious Muslims" among us hail from these places and the selected pilgrims simply do not have the financial means to perform hajj.

But that is not the case. These people are financially solvent and were prioritised over other less privileged pilgrims for "free hajj." We earnestly ask the religious affairs ministry, what were the selection criteria?

This group of very fortunate pilgrims includes, unsurprisingly, the relatives, staffers and close aides—nominated from the Mymensingh-4 constituency—of the religious affairs minister along with other high-level officials of the ruling party. The ministry had previously sent a 171-member delegation to Saudi Arabia to help a Bangladeshi medical team, 163 of whom have no background in medicine. Instead of sending a proper delegation comprising of doctors, nurses and other professionals, the religious affairs ministry came to the conclusion that gunmen and personal assistants would somehow be of more use in looking after the health of our hajjis.

This is nothing but a shoddy display of nepotism. Such actions on the part of the government are a blatant disregard for public suffering and public money. If taxpayers' money should be allocated for "free hajj" at all, should the ministry not rise above narrow partisanship and be more egalitarian in selecting the candidates?

Tense times on Korean peninsula

Employ diplomacy not rhetoric

PRESIDENT Donald Trump has matched North Korean threats with his own brand of aggressive rhetoric promising Pyongyang a "fire and fury" response. Not since the Cuban missile crisis has the world come this close to the prospect of a serious conflagration and today the world sits back in dismay as the two sides blatantly talk about war. The latest round of UN-imposed sanctions imposed upon Pyongyang is bound to hurt the North Korean economy to the tune of USD 3 billion in lost export earnings. The latest outburst from Washington has now been matched by a threat from North Korea to launch a pre-emptive strike against the United States with statements like "turn the US mainland into the theatre of a nuclear war."

We need neither nuclear threats nor a nuclear war. Yes, past negotiations under the Obama administration have failed to yield results. North Korea refused to dismantle its nuclear programme. But now, with its principal ally China backing tougher sanctions, there is possibility of serious Chinese involvement working with the US towards achieving long term peace on the Korean peninsula.

Threats do not work with Pyongyang and Washington knows it. It is time to step back from this continuous brinkmanship that could easily be misinterpreted by either of the two sides and begin a conflict that will end in horrendous loss of life. What would work are direct talks with the regime in the north and to that end the US administration should be giving its attention. It is inconceivable that Pyongyang will give up its deterrent without some sort of assurance of regime integrity. Such an outcome can only be possible when all parties come to the negotiating table and agree to de-escalate a very dangerous situation. The time has come to restart 6-Party talks.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

It's not hajj, it's a pleasure trip

The Daily Star has recently published a news report titled "Hajj pilgrimage at tax payers' expense" informing us that the government is spending more than Tk 10 crore of public money to send 318 persons to Saudi Arabia for the purpose of hajj despite the fact that many of these persons are financially solvent. The details of these persons were described in the report, with comments from religious scholars.

Islam made hajj mandatory only for those who are financially solvent, and physically and mentally fit. Performing hajj with taxpayers' money, therefore, does not make any sense. It is tantamount to going on "a pleasure trip". It would be highly unethical for anyone to do so. I urge the concerned ministry to terminate this money wasting project.

Luthfe Ali, US

No more admission test, please!

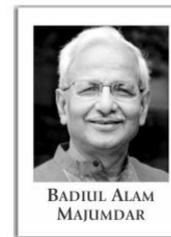
The news report published in The Daily Star titled "7 Newly Affiliated Colleges: DU to hold separate tests for admission" has drawn my attention. When people from all walks, including our honourable President, advised to introduce a combined admission test given the suffering of students and guardians along with a huge financial expenditure, this news shocked us a lot. Now, coaching centres can charge extra fees for their preparations.

I urge the concerned authorities to cancel the decision to hold separate admission tests for the said colleges, and instead initiate the process to hold a combined admission test that may also cover all public universities of the country.

Mawduda Hasnin, By email.

Towards free, fair and credible elections

EC must work to gain credibility among citizens



BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

WE commend the Election Commission for initiating dialogues with the stakeholders although it is not legally obliged to do so. We hope that the dialogues are not held for their own sake, and that the commission will take the recommendations of the stakeholders seriously. Most of all, we hope it will forcefully implement the existing laws to ensure free, fair and credible elections.

Article 119 of our Constitution mandates that the EC will hold parliamentary elections. Elections necessarily mean free, fair and credible elections. Elections also mean competitive elections, as "to elect" implies choosing from alternatives. To ensure such elections, the EC must create a level playing field for all electoral contestants. Ensuring a level playing field requires not only taking actions by the commission after the declaration of the election schedule, but also at all times.

The EC is not constituted only for holding elections. It is a constitutional body created to perform a host of other functions round the year to ensure that the elections are free, fair and credible. Thus, it must be always vigilant.

The EC is a regulatory authority and the political parties have to be registered under it. Thus, as their regulatory authority, the EC has the obligation to ensure that all political parties can carry out their normal political activities at all times. The commission also has the inherent authority to do so. According to Bangladesh Supreme Court, the EC has the power "to supplement the statutory rules for the sole purpose of ensuring free and fair elections" [Altaf Hussain vs Abul Kashem 45DLR (AD) 1993]. Thus, to claim that it does not have the authority to regulate the activities of political parties before the declaration of election schedule amounts to shying away from its constitutional responsibilities.

In this regard, we can take lessons from the Indian experience. In 2002, the Indian Supreme Court ordered that candidates running for Parliament must declare their antecedents, such as criminal records, wealth statements in the form of affidavits. The Indian EC proposed to its relevant ministry to change the rules in order to implement the judgment, but the ministry failed to do so. The commission then went ahead and unilaterally implemented the court judgment with a circular, even though it did not, by law, have the rulemaking authority. It should be noted that our commission has the legal authority to frame rules.

The deployment of armed forces during elections would be critically important for ensuring free and fair elections. The armed forces, by law, were part of the law enforcement agencies during the 9th parliamentary elections, in which Awami League had a landslide victory. Thus, the ruling party's objection to having the armed forces play the same role is not very persuasive. Besides, opinion surveys have repeatedly shown that people hold armed forces in high esteem and they would naturally feel safe with the armed forces around during elections, especially because of blatant partisan roles of our politicised law enforcement agencies in the



past. Furthermore, according to media reports, the field level election officials, who will be responsible for conducting the elections, want the armed forces in the field during elections.

In addition to changing the definition of law enforcement agencies, free and fair elections would require further amendments of the RPO to: (1) bring back the provision of "no" vote; (2) include the requirement of affidavit for disclosures and tax returns for reserved seats in Parliament; (3) online filing of nomination papers; and (4) publishing on websites the names of all members of the political parties and updating those regularly. Readers may remember that "no" vote was part of the law prior to the 9th parliamentary elections. It may also be noted that the Indian Supreme Court in 2013 ordered the institution of "no" vote in their parliamentary elections.

Credible elections also require reliable electoral roll. Our present electoral roll has serious flaws in that it has a major "gender gap". Since nearly 10 million Bangladeshis work abroad, most of whom are male and many of whom are not voters, we should have more female voters in our electoral roll than male. It is not thus surprising that we had more than 1.4 million female voters compared to male voters in our electoral roll in 2008. However, since then women have been under-enrolled, and according to the latest count, the gender gap was 20 percent.

For elections to be free, fair and credible, there must also be clean candidates. Buying political party nominations by undesirable elements is rampant in our country, which can perhaps be prevented if grassroots party functionaries are given a say in the nomination process, as required by the RPO. The EC must vigorously enforce it. The commission must also enforce the disclosure requirements. According to the RPO, if candidates hide information or provide misleading

information in their affidavits, their nominations must be cancelled, and if elected, their elections must be declared void. Thus, post-election forensic audit of selected affidavits could largely clean up our electoral arena. Similar scrutiny of election expense reports can also help us dispel the image that "we have the best democracy money can buy".

Democratic and transparent political parties are also an essential prerequisite for free, fair and peaceful elections. The RPO requires political parties to have internal democracy and financial transparency. The EC must enforce these provisions of the RPO. It must scrutinise its audited statements. It must also insist that political parties disband their associated and affiliate bodies and foreign branches, as required by the RPO.

One of the goals of delimitation of constituencies is to reduce the dispersion in the number of voters among constituencies. But the delimitation of 88 constituencies under the Rakib commission further increased the disparity in the number of voters among constituencies. The current commission, therefore, must pay attention to such anomalies. It must also limit the number of constituencies for metropolitan areas like Dhaka city.

Finally, for the EC's actions to be effective and acceptable, it must have credibility. Its credibility was already undermined to some extent by the non-transparent manner in which it was constituted. It was further compromised by the recent unilateral decision by the CEC, along with the commission secretary, to transfer a large number of EC officials without consulting other commissioners. It should be noted that the EC is a composite body and the CEC cannot take any substantive decision without the authorisation of other commissioners. Thus, one of the highest priorities of the EC at this time is to gain credibility among citizens.

Dr Badiul Alam Majumdar is Secretary, SHUJAN: Citizens for Good Governance.

THE GULF CRISIS

Qatar's 2022 World Cup moves into the firing line



JAMES M DORSEY

A French investigation into possible corruption in business deals related to Qatar's winning of World Cup hosting rights moved the 2022 tournament a step closer to becoming enmeshed in the two-month-old Gulf crisis.

Taken together with the almost simultaneous announcement of the milestone transfer to Qatar-owned French club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) of Brazilian star Neymar, the two events highlight Qatar's perennial difficulty in capitalising on its massive investment in sports as part of its public diplomacy and soft power strategy.

The investigation casts a shadow on Neymar's transfer from FC Barcelona at a record-breaking cost of USD 260 million as a demonstration of Qatar's ability to resist the two-month old UAE-Saudi-led diplomatic and economic boycott of the Gulf state; move ahead with its infrastructure plans, including World Cup-related projects; and continue to heavily invest in a multi-pronged soft power ploy of which sports is a key pillar.

The investigation links former French president Nicolas Sarkozy to millions of euros involved in business deals that were allegedly part of a three-way deal to ensure French support for Qatar's World Cup bid as well as the vote of one-time French star Michel Platini, who headed European soccer body UEFA and was a member of FIFA's executive committee before being banned from involvement in soccer on corruption charges.

Qatar's successful World Cup bid has been mired in controversy from day one. Allegations of wrongdoing in the bid, enhanced by multiple FIFA corruption scandals that have rocked the world body for the past seven years, and criticism of the Gulf state's controversial labour regime that have been revived by the Gulf crisis, meshed with Eurocentric assertions. Eurocentric critics charged that Qatar did not deserve to host the World Cup because it was too small, boasted temperatures not conducive to performance, and had no soccer legacy.

The criticism of Qatar, although never convincingly countered by the Gulf state, had largely faded into the background until June when a UAE-Saudi-led diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar raised questions of Qatar's ability to move ahead with preparations for the tournament. The questions were fuelled by feeble attempts by Qatar's detractors to revive the criticism and suggest that it should be deprived of its hosting rights.

Qatar, while denying any wrongdoing in its bid, has taken several steps to counter criticism of its controversial kafala or labour sponsorship regime, including becoming the only Gulf state to engage with its critics, and legal reforms that were welcomed by human rights groups and

trade unions, but deemed not far-reaching enough.

Qatar faces a crucial International Labour Organization (ILO) hearing in November that will serve as barometer of the Gulf state's response to the criticism of the living and working conditions of migrant workers, who constitute the majority of its population. The ILO's conclusion is likely to take on added significance against the backdrop of the Gulf crisis. Human rights groups have argued that the crisis offers Qatar an opportunity to secure a moral high ground by abolishing rather than reforming the kafala system.

Qatar, in a move designed to reassure expatriates and project itself as being in the forefront of labour reform, said earlier this month that it would offer permanent residence to a select group of expatriates. The offer that does not apply to the vast majority of migrant workers is unlikely to deflect the criticism.

Alongside the looming revival of attention on labour, the French investigation revives the focus on the



integrity of the Qatari World Cup bid that already is the subject of a Swiss enquiry and looms large on the background of the indictment on corruption charges in the United States of numerous FIFA officials.

France's interference in the FIFA vote on the Qatari World Cup bid was documented in a lengthy expose in French soccer magazine France Football. The magazine detailed a meeting engineered by then president Sarkozy in 2010 between Platini, then Qatari crown prince and current emir Sheikh Tamim bin Haman Al-Thani, and a representative of PSG. The three-way deal cut at that meeting allegedly involved Platini agreeing to vote for the Qatari bid in exchange for Qatar acquir-

ing the French club, creating a French sports television channel, and investing in France.

Britain's *The Daily Telegraph* reported that French investigators were examining whether Sarkozy may have received funds from deals linked to the 2010 meeting, including the sale to Qatar of a five percent stake in French water management company Veolia as well as the purchase in 2010 of PSG by Oryx Qatar Sports Investments, believed to be a Qatari government investment vehicle.

The British paper, quoting French sources, reported that Euro 182 million "may have been siphoned off the side lines" of the deals and also used for payments to World Cup officials. A spokeswoman for the National Financial Prosecutor's Office in Paris said they were "carrying out two separate preliminary inquiries" into Veolia and the World Cup bid. She said there was no established link between the two inquiries and Sarkozy was not "formally and personally targeted at this stage."

The investigation coupled with the revival of the labour issue and the looming ILO hearing moves Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup into the firing line in the Gulf crisis. Qatar was so far able to deflect concern that the crisis would affect its ability to host the tournament because it would take place 5.5 years from now by which time the crisis would have long been resolved, and that it was able to move ahead with preparations despite a rise in the cost of construction materials because of the UAE-Saudi-led boycott.

The French investigation and the labour issue, however, opens the opportunity for a new line of attack. Perhaps, a silver lining for Qatar in the looming battle over its World Cup hosting rights is the fact that this line of attack, like much else in the Gulf crisis, would have a pot-blames-the-kettle character. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf states have labour regimes like that of Qatar.

US intelligence officials have asserted that the UAE engineered the Gulf crisis by orchestrating the hacking of a Qatari government website that created the excuse for the boycott of the Gulf state.

Much of the sabre-rattling in the Gulf crisis focuses on influencing policymakers and international public opinion with efforts to resolve the crisis stalemated; and the international community's unwillingness to support the anti-Qatar alliance's demands that target the Gulf state's sovereignty and ability to chart its own independent course. The emergence of the World Cup as a new battleground offers Qatar an opportunity to grab the bull by the horns. It's an opportunity Qatar has so far availed itself only half-heartedly.

Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and the author of *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* blog, and a book with the same title.