

Remembering the essence of Ramadan

We should strive to be better human beings

AS Muslims all over the world begin to observe another holy month of Ramadan, it is worthwhile to remember the important lessons of this month in making us better human beings. For it is not just about abstaining from food, drink and harsh words during the fasting hours while worshipping the Creator that makes this time so special. It is a month of deep introspection and sacrifice and one that gives Muslims the opportunity to show their humanity to others. This is through sharing their food and wealth with the less fortunate as well as by demonstrating self-restraint, tolerance of all regardless of their differences, and being honest and pure in all their dealings.

Thus, the practice of traders artificially hiking up prices of essentials well ahead of the holy month, as has been reported in this paper, is completely contradictory to the teachings of Islam. It demonstrates the very greed and dishonesty that is to be shed forever during Ramadan. The government has repeatedly announced to the businesspeople that prices of essentials must not be raised during Ramadan, yet traders have devised this cunning strategy to dupe the ordinary consumers.

We hope the government will be vigilant about further hikes in prices as it is deplorable that those with limited incomes must forgo essential items in their diet after a daylong fast. We also must urge the authorities to take strict measures against those who sell adulterated food as iftar items during this month, using toxic colourants, burnt oil and other harmful ingredients. While such measures should be a continuous exercise given the shocking level of adulteration of food items, special attention should be given during this month when unscrupulous individuals try to make a quick buck by accelerating such unholy practices.

Let us start this holy month with a renewed vow to imbibe within ourselves tolerance, acceptance of others and empathy for our fellow beings. May Ramadan bring peace and wellbeing to all.

Save our golden fibre

Diversify products, seek new markets

AS the country's jute sector has been facing a serious crisis because of the falling demand of jute and jute goods in the international markets, mostly Turkey and India, it's time we found out the problems facing our jute industry and addressed them. According to the Export Promotion Bureau, shipment of jute goods, including jute yarn, which is the main export earner in the sector, dipped 23 percent year-on-year to USD 532 million until March of the current fiscal year. Also, exports of traditional jute goods have been falling in the face of competition from low-priced polypropylene and synthetic goods. In addition, the domestic market is also not growing much because of poor performance by the BJMC, market-distorting activities and limited capacity of private millers as well as a lack of varied products.

Making diversified jute products should be a priority for us, if we want to revive our jute sector. Currently, only a handful of private and public mills and small entrepreneurs are producing differentiated jute goods in the country. The government's 20 percent cash incentive for making diversified jute products will not help, if the prices of raw materials remain high and the decades-old machinery, mostly in the state-run mills, is not replaced with modern ones. Also, the lack of innovation and research in making diversified goods remains a big issue for our jute sector, which should be addressed properly. India and China have made a lot of progress in this regard over the last two-three decades. If they can do it, being a major supplier of jute products globally, why can't we? We just need to make some sincere efforts. And for our domestic market to grow, we need to strictly enforce the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act passed some nine years ago.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ensuring peace and religious harmony

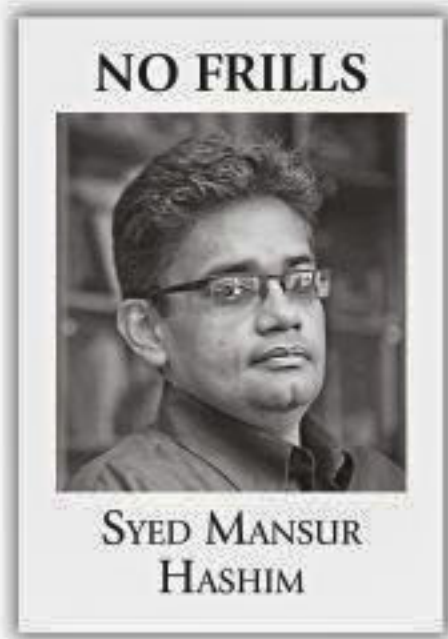
Religious extremism has become a global issue in our times. Bangladesh too has not been immune to such a global problem and has, time and again, fallen victim to it. Our government, however, is not doing enough to fight the threat of militancy and communal violence, and consequently, Islamic radicalism has reached an alarming stage in our country.

Islam is a religion of peace. This notion should be instilled into the minds of our youth to prevent them from committing atrocities. Furthermore, they can be engaged in different sports and cultural activities so that they do not get isolated from society and become victims of the recruiters of extreme ideologies. This is badly missing in our society today and may well be one reason why radicalism is on the rise. To counter this threat, I think every mosque should be encouraged to preach sermons on religious harmony and the importance of being respectful towards all other faiths.

I believe our government should think of reintroducing secularism with a stronger foothold in our constitution. Unfortunately, the majority thinks secularism opposes the essence of religious sentiment, which is not true at all. Rather, secularism is a concept which can accommodate multiple religions, in harmony.

Ferdous, Uttara

A quarter of Dhaka's wetlands gone



NO FRILLS
AT the end of April, at a joint conference that included Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA), Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP), Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and other groups came together to share the findings of a study spanning the last nine years on how there has been a systematic degradation of Dhaka's overall environment to benefit business. The study covers six areas including the Thana(s) Savar, Roopganj, Keraniganj, DAP (2010), the Gazipur part under DAP and the Dhaka metropolitan area.

We learned that since 2010, the city has lost around 43,200 out of the total 187,958 acres of wetlands that Dhaka had. That means we have lost 22 percent of our wetlands over the span of nearly a decade. When we look at wetland, there are three types: flood flow zones, water retention areas and water bodies like rivers, canals, lakes and *beels*. In the DAP area alone, we are losing 2,500 acres of wetland every year. Breaking down the overall loss over the nine-year period, we find that 27 percent of 141,069 acres of free flow flood zones, around 34 percent of 10,419 acres of water retention areas and eight percent of 36,497 acres of other wetlands were grabbed or filled up.

In the main city, we have areas like Basila, Bashundhara residential area, Beraid, Amin Bazar, and North Uttara that have been severely affected. The conversion of wetlands which should have been conserved has been done in the name of development and urbanisation, but the reality of course is that such massive violation of DAP has been made possible because of a lack of good governance and oversight. When we look at the fact that Dhaka has been a magnet for economic activity and that has been drawing people by the millions hailing from diverse backgrounds, it is easy to imagine



PHOTO: STAR

why the realtors have cashed in on a building boom to support an expanding economy. As put by Professor Adil Mohammed Khan, General Secretary, BIP, "conservation of water bodies like rivers and canals, wetland, retention areas and flood flow zones are all vital to making development and urbanisation sustainable maintaining an ecological balance."

This is where policymakers got it wrong. By touting Dhaka as the premier investment hub without thinking about developing townships or smaller towns in the periphery of the capital city, we have been left with demand for housing that far outstrips the availability of land. The irresponsible planning and development of the city which simply ignored the DAP and where Rajuk has turned a blind eye to the all-out grabbing of water bodies was highlighted during a thought sharing episode back in 2017 between Rajuk and realtors where

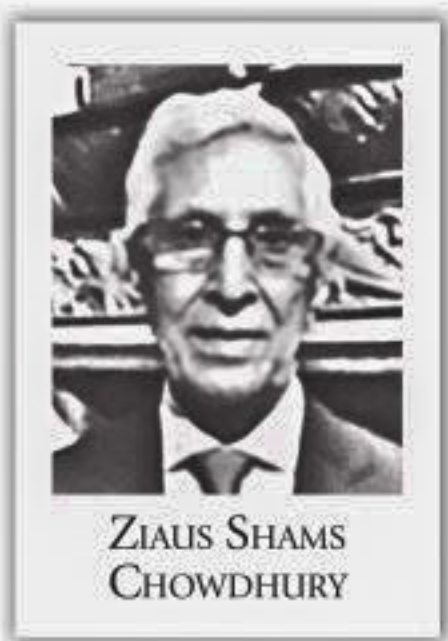
the latter basically told Rajuk that it is ludicrous for Rajuk to try and reclaim what has already been grabbed. They went on to state that Dhaka is actually better off without its wetlands because the only purpose water bodies serve is to increase the mosquito population.

Experts contend that without these water bodies, the city faces many problems, one of which is water-logging. Back in April, 2018, the city had witnessed 55mm of rainfall in six hours which was enough to produce knee-deep water in major residential and commercial areas. Although city authorities had been working on a major overhaul of the drainage system, the fact of the matter is that today, the city is lacking in enough canals and lowland to let the water run out. But because we have been lacking in foresight, Dhaka's lowlands and canals are being filled up at an unprecedented rate and it simply cannot handle any

heavy deluge. That explains why Dhaka has only two percent area dedicated to water retention against a requirement of 12 percent for a city of this size and when we factor in that nearly 90 percent of Dhaka is covered in concrete, the rainy season water has no way to drain out to water bodies and we end up with water-logging on city roads. Filling up wetlands in violation of DAP has been made possible because the custodians of the city turned a blind eye to the syndicate of businessmen backed up by political influence, working with corrupt officials over the years. The bad practices have now become institutional and with no accountability to speak of, laws are violated at will for profit is king and there is enough money to go around superseding the need for a balanced approach to city development.

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Trump's open warfare on congressional oversight



ZIAUL SHAMS CHOWDHURY
AN explosive atmosphere is brewing in the US after Special Counsel Robert Mueller submitted his report on whether President Trump had benefited from Russian help in winning the 2016 election and whether he was guilty of obstructing justice. On May 1, during Attorney General William Barr's testimony to the senate judiciary committee, some Democratic members of the committee tore into him to expose lies he told about Mueller's conclusion. His conduct clearly showed that he was acting as Trump's counsel and surrogate rather than impartially discharging the duty of AG.

The situation had already become tense and confrontational as Trump embarked on a fraught path of challenging the oversight role that the constitution confers on the Congress. He has blocked a number of subpoenas the Congress issued to some members of his staff. He asked those called for interrogation to defy the summons.

A pivotal figure in the battle is Donald McGahn, former Trump Counsel. He defied an order from Trump to fire Mueller and thus pre-empt the investigation. McGahn also said that the president told him to deny the episode ever occurred. In other words, the president first tried to block the investigation, and failing, he tried to get McGahn to say he made no such

The Congress is resolved to get at the truth, and establish clearly, for the American people, whether or not the president committed a serious misdemeanour unbecoming of a president. Legal experts say Trump's defiant action could face obstacles. The House has the option of holding in contempt those Trump officials who have refused to comply with the summons. It can ask judges to order compliance.

On Trump's defiance of the congressional oversight, it is hard to disagree with the observation of the House Judiciary committee chairman Jerold Nadler that it is an attempt to "render Congress inert as a separate and co-equal branch of the government. If the Congress does not stand up, it will never be able to stand up to any president in

taken the approach of negotiations and accommodation, consenting to investigation demands which are seen to have a clear and compelling logic.

In this febrile situation, talk about impeachment has acquired some momentum after Barr's disastrous performance in the senate hearing. At this point 56 percent of Americans are against impeachment, and 37 percent are for. In any case, with the pliant and totally submissive Republicans controlling the Senate, even if the House impeaches the president, he cannot be removed from office. As the current fight evolves it is quite possible that the public sentiment on impeachment question could change.

Senator Elizabeth Warren called for Trump's impeachment sometime back. Now on April 30, Joe Biden has also



PHOTO: BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP

When Mueller testifies to Congress in a few days, it will be a blockbuster moment.

future." He said that, "the very system of the government of America...the system of not having a president as a dictator—is very much at stake."

Nadler's views are very similar to what the *Washington Post* and the *Economist* magazine said. The *Washington Post* in an op-ed by its editorial board observed: "Sorry Mr President, Congress has every right to investigate you." The paper says that "absent very strong countervailing considerations—stronger than those the administration asserted in this case—Congress is generally entitled to disclosure."

The *Economist* magazine more or less echoes the same view: "The author of the constitution made it clear that Congress has the task of dealing with a rogue president."

On congressional oversight, normally the American presidents have

said that "if the administration blocks the (congressional) investigation, they have no alternative but to go to the only other constitutional resort which is impeachment."

Some important things that happened during Barr's hearing in the senate judiciary committee needs to be briefly stated. The most serious revelation, and something that destroyed the Attorney General's trustworthiness, was that the Democratic members revealed to the American people that Barr was trying to portray a false picture about the president's conduct. He purposely held back Mueller's executive summary, and created his own summary different from Mueller's. His whole thrust was to clear the president.

A second notable thing is that the Republican Chairman of the committee Lindsay Graham's contention in opening

statement set a brazenly partisan tone. His remark that "the President never did anything to stop Mueller from doing his job" stands in stark contrast to the reality.

On Barr's wishy-washy replies to questions, Vermont senator Patrick Leahy accused him of "purposely misleading". Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D) Rhode Island blurted out: "I mean, boy! That's some masterful hairsplitting." And Barr equivocated when Kamala Harris, a presidential candidate and an ex-attorney general of California asked if the president or anyone in the White House had asked or suggested that he open an investigation on any one. "Yes or no?" she pursued as if she was interrogating a shoplifter.

On the question of whether on Russian collusion Mueller exonerated Trump, the fact is that Mueller revealed a lot of episodes of Trump's campaign people like Paul Manafort and Carter Page having made contacts with Russians. While the president is not directly incriminated, the political implications for him is quite troubling.

On obstruction of justice issue, the following things investigated by Mueller matter profoundly:

- Trump's wish to fire Mueller.
- Trump's sacking of FBI Director James Comey.
- His order to the White House counsel McGahn to deny that Trump had wanted to fire Mueller.

Barr was called for interrogation by the House judiciary committee on Thursday May 2 but he didn't turn up. Congress is weighing the option of holding him in contempt.

What is the legal basis of this congressional tool? It is not a constitutional provision. However, in 1821, the Supreme Court said that without the power to hold people in contempt of Congress, the legislative branch would "be exposed to every indignity, and interruption that rudeness, caprice, or even conspiracy may mediate against it." So Congress stands on solid ground if it moves a contempt motion.

Trump has adamantly resisted attempts to keep a lot of personal issues hidden from public view: like his financial affairs. There is now a sense that the discussion on the Mueller report and interrogation of Barr in senate is making the dam leak. When Mueller testifies to Congress in a few days, it will be a blockbuster moment. It is possible that what comes out of the Mueller hearing will have a significant impact on public sentiments, and could even be a tipping point.

Ziaul Shams Chowdhury is a former ambassador.