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Fewer strikes, more dialogue will reduce poverty

'Hartal culture' resulted in 3- 4 % GDP loss during 1990s: UN Report

Dhaka: 10 March, 2005: Both major political parties in Bangladesh have been equally active in using national strikes (hartals) as a means of protest, costing the nation a staggering 3-4% of GDP annually during the 1990s, reveals a report released earlier today by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Dhaka.

The Report, entitled: *'Beyond Hartals: Towards Democratic Dialogue in Bangladesh'*, notes that, when in opposition, political parties are usually denied adequate chance to voice their views. The Opposition is frequently sidelined in parliament and their social mobilization activities are curbed, says the Report. As a result, politicians claim that calling hartals is often their only chance to raise their concerns. The Report puts forward a number of short-term and long-term alternatives to hartals, which encourages whichever party is in opposition to voice their concerns through peaceful methods and, at the same time, encourages the regime in power to allow greater space for the 'culture of democratic dialogue' to take hold and grow in Bangladesh.

According to the Report, hartals were first used in South Asia to overthrow occupying powers. "Historically, the hartal culture has respectable roots in Ghandi's civil disobedience against colonialism. But, Bangladeshis are now masters in their own home. The nation has a Parliament where members can raise concerns, it also has a relatively free media where new thinking can be expressed," UNDP Resident Representative Jorgen Lissner said.

Since the advent of democracy in Bangladesh (1991), however, the frequency of hartals has increased dramatically, according to the Report. From 1995 to 2002, for example, 611 hartals were called. Compared to the period from 1947 to 1954, when only six hartals were called (to oppose language restrictions).

The Report dubs this vicious spiral as Bangladesh's *'hartal culture'*, and concludes that this culture is hindering the nation's economic growth and development prospects.

When a nation-wide hartal is called by one of the major parties, Bangladesh is forced to shut down. Shops, markets and places of work stay closed. Children miss school. Buses and other means of transport are forced to stay off the roads. As a result, earnings are reduced, education activities obstructed, and social services are difficult for ordinary people to access.



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For the nation's school and university students, hartals translate into missed classes and postponed exams. According to the Report, many are now calling today's students the 'delayed-generation' as their wait to graduate and enter the workforce becomes longer and longer, causing financial strain on their families.

On the international stage, the nation suffers from an image of instability as hartals frequently cause missed shipments and lost orders, according to leading business people interviewed for the Report. "In a globalized economy with fierce competition for investment capital and jobs, no country can afford continuous confrontational politics. If a country is largely closed for democratic dialogue, it cannot possibly be seen as open for business," UNDP Resident Representative Jorgen Lissner said.

Today, just under half of Bangladesh's people live below the poverty line. The economy, with an average yearly growth rate of 5 percent has an impressive potential for pulling millions out of poverty said Mr. Lissner. "If Bangladesh could save the economic and social losses due to hartals, the nation could aspire to match the outstanding progress being made by other countries in Asia. Ending the hartal culture could yield a development leap for the entire nation," he said.

To gauge public opinion about the '*hartal culture*', more than 3000 people from all walks of life were polled. The results of this survey are contained in the new report. 95 percent of people surveyed believed that hartals damage the economy and society because of hampered business activities, lack of access to health and education facilities, damage to property and public building, and loss of income. Most people surveyed (55%) also felt that the strikes failed to have any impact on policy. 70 percent thought constructive alternatives to hartals do exist. The most-cited alternatives are public rallies (59%) and discussion in parliament (51%).

The Report makes numerous recommendations for moving 'beyond the culture of hartal', and helping democracy to grow. It suggests reform of Parliament, as well as the electoral and political party systems by introducing such measures as 'opposition' days/ hours in Parliament and ensuring the independence of the Speaker. The Report also recommends that Government establish basic watchdog agencies such as the Ombudsman, a human rights commission and an effective anti-corruption commission.

Bangladeshi experts in the field of history, economics, law and media wrote the Report. Once the first draft was complete, UNDP sought the views and recommendations of political parties, civil society and the business community through a series of closed-door consultations. Their concerns and comments are reflected in the final document released today.

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For further information please contact: Ms. Lisa Hiller, via email: lisa.hiller@undp.org, ph: 811 8600, ext. 2043, mob: 011812042, or Mr. Sakil Faizullah via email: sakil.faizullah@undp.org, ph: 811 8600, ext. 2415, mob: 011 812046.