

Threat of religious extremism

Let's not be blinkered

THE happenings in Joypurhat strongly suggest that some fundamentalist militant outfits are not only present in the country but are also working secretly to push forward their agenda.

Police arrested 21 members of the Jamaatul Mujahideen after a gunfight and recovered arms and ammunition from their possession. This was clearly not an encounter between ordinary outlaws and the members of a law enforcement agency. The Mujahideen members stood their ground and engaged the police in a firefight and that alone was indicative of their preparations, training and capability to fight against the police. So they were not run-of-the-mill kind of terrorists. They are organised and seem to have been indoctrinated by their leaders for launching a particular type of campaign which the members of the group claim, as per the information gathered from printed materials recovered from a house, to be a 'holy war'.

They were also prepared for any eventuality with a high level of motivation and some specific mission to fulfil. The Joypurhat incidents also indicate that the militants might be working in league with others of their ilk. The recent arms haul in Bogra was a pointer to trafficking in lethal weapons. The circumstantial evidences suggest that they could be part of a wider network of ideologically charged zealots working to attain their long-term goals in a very organised manner.

All these point to the dangers that the nation may have to face unless such activities are nipped before they assume intractable proportions. But the government's initial reaction appears to be one of shying away from decisive action that is needed to check the growth of such militant organisations. It does not appear to be willing to dip its feet in troubled water. And political finger pointing, the sole purpose of which is to undermine rivals, often blurs the picture to a great extent.

There is reason to believe that the incidents have a regional and global dimension, particularly because the surge in terrorist activities is far too manifest in many countries these days. So the government should think in terms of seeking help from international intelligence networks to get to the bottom of the phenomenon and unearth the links, if any, between the militants and international extremist groups.

Highly testing export target

Orchestration holds key to success

THE government has set itself an ambitious export goal. The target is to earn US\$7.49 billion in fiscal 2003-2004, topping, albeit notionally, last year's export income by as much as 14.39 per cent. It is distinctly on the high side as is borne out by the fact that average export growth in the last five years has been 10.85 per cent barring in fiscal 2001 when the global economy took a tumble after 9/11. While export volumes have grown, prices have not, with the result that the benefits in real terms to the exporting countries have been minimal. The differential between the unit price of import and that of export has helped the North to eat the cake and take it home too in the increasingly iniquitous world trade regime.

That said, let's move to the market shares we are planning to attain so as to brace up to the task. The US market absorbs one-third of our exports. Undeterred by a negative growth of 2.45 per cent in 2002-03 we are looking to achieve 9.27 per cent growth in export to the US during the current fiscal. What we are latching on is a sign of recovery in the US as reflected by the increase in orders and per unit price of RMG recently. Overall, we are targeting 12.60 per cent export growth representing US\$6.46 in terms of industrial goods. Insofar as intermediary products go, we are aiming at the highest growth rate of 15.65 per cent in the current fiscal.

But the targets don't look unattainable if we take into account some positive developments taking place, especially in the market access and value addition areas. We shall have duty- and quota-free access to Canada as a new-year gift, duty-free entry into Australia and New Zealand from July, not to mention the special treatment we're going to receive from Thailand, Pakistan and India. Cash subsidies were given for the purposes of value addition to frozen foods like ready-to-cook-meal and the like. The Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) is going to have a complement of private sector experts which augurs well as it could ensure a voice from the chamber bodies to be heard. In the ultimate analysis, it is the 47 Bangladesh missions abroad which will have to do the salesmanship, especially in light of the increased market access we have obtained on paper. Unless the supply side is improved, the higher demand prospect will remain a mirage.

Swallowing the bitter pill?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVEN as Israel is considered to be the brain child of Britain who by initiating the Balfour Declaration in 1919 and foul playing its mandatory rule in Palestine after the first world war played a significant role in setting the stage for the Jewish homeland, the United States since took over the onerous task of sustaining it in a hostile geopolitical environment. Indeed the US found it as God-sent ally in the world's strategic hub and she spared no effort in fortifying the nascent state with all possible assistance to promote her interest in resource-rich Middle East. So much so that her economic aid given to Israel far exceeded the amount of US' total external aid doled out to the rest of the world. She used the record number of vetoes in the UNSC to save Israel's skin. Obviously a key component of Washington's agenda involves improving Israel's credibility and her international standing, crucial to that agenda is the US' well-calibrated policy to project Israel as a credible partner for peace in the Middle East.

The centre-piece of this policy is the current peace bid under the rubric of 'read map' to cobble together some sort of peace deal between the Palestinians and Israelis -- of course, on the latter's term. But centric on this peace deal is to somehow wangle Israel's recognition from as many Muslim countries as possible. Notwithstanding a glittering array of Washington loyalists around Israel -- Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Gulf Emirates -- that need no inducement to be on the right side of the US, the latter is, however, currently busy securing recognition for Israel both in the region and

beyond. A bewildering variety of baits are being dangled before the Muslim countries most of whom are at the receiving end of the spectrum. The baits of trade concession, waiving off old debts, fresh aid package, entry into US market supply of military hardware and even sparing some country from punitive action and merely the gesture of friendship are liberally traded for obtaining recognition for the 'reality' of Israel.

After having softened the attitude of Arab-Muslim countries in Israel's neighbourhood with the jarring

recognition to the fore the Muslim world has been made to stand face to face with a situation it always wanted to avoid. At least for last half a century, apart from their common faith the Muslims across the world were often brought on a single platform with their common abhorrence for the state of Israel. It was not so much because of bitter inter communal feelings as it was because of the entity enjoying no legitimacy -- historical, moral, political or juridical. Until midway into the last century today's Jewish Israel was 'Arab Palestine' and the

of latter's anti-Arab stance and profession of Zionism which is likened to apartheid by Nelson Mandela. That rock solid Arab-Muslim unity has since been under assault.

At Israel's birth only two Muslim countries -- Turkey and Shah's Iran -- recognised Israel. While Turkey could have done it out of grudge for the Arabs, held responsible for the break-up of Ottoman empire, Iran then a lackey of the US obviously did it under the latter's pressure. However the position remained unchanged till 1979 when Egypt

were on retreat. Can the tide be turned again?

But by now Israel is not only a reality, it has also turned into a monster threatening the peace and security of entire Arab world. Even if it was politically a pariah because of its controversial birth and a blanket rejection by the Arab world, Israel was, under big power patronisation, admitted to the UN in 1949 and to European common market in 1979. Currently there are more than a hundred diplomatic missions in Israel. In addition to the US all the other permanent members of the

PERSPECTIVES

It is upto the Muslim countries under pressure or persuasion by the friends of Israel on the issue of recognition to consider it keeping in view the best of their interests, but keeping the door shut to Israel will yield no positive result as evident from long history of Arab-Israel conflict. Even when one is considered enemy, the enemy also is required to be engaged. The Muslim world baffled at the speed and complexities of events around them will have to decide -- and decide before too long -- what will be the shape of that engagement.

effects of 'shock and awe' exhibited in second Gulf war the sight is now set on the Muslim countries in the peripheries -- South and South East Asia -- which are unnecessarily burdened with emotions for Al-Aqsa or sentiments for their Arab-Palestinian brethren. The approaches are diverse in dealing with these countries depending on their internal and external dynamics. Pakistan, for example has been put in the category of countries possessing the weapons of mass destruction which is required to be neutralised under Bush Doctrine through pre-emptive strike. One way to save Pakistan, in view of its contribution to the war on terror, could be to have Pakistan to recognise Israel's right to exist as a sovereign nation. During the recent Bush-Musharraf parley at Camp David, the US promised \$3 billion of economic and military aid to Pakistan provided a number of stated and unstated conditions were met. Recognition of Israel may well be one of those unstated conditions.

With President Bush's gambit bringing the question of Israel's metamorphosis was effected overnight through brutalities expelling its pristine people from their home and hearth.

However, in an unprecedented solidarity the Muslim world not only condemned the big powers' collusion in bringing Israel into being it also withheld its recognition of the ugly reality. It stubbornly remained reluctant to embrace Israel because

broke rank to be the first Arab country to recognise Israel following Camp David accord. The rejectionist camp comprised of most of the Arab world held back the tide of its bandwagon effect but gave in when PLO itself recognised the right of Israel to exist at the outset of Oslo peace process in 1993. Jordan soon followed the suit. Eversince, not only the Palestinians but the Arabs

UN security council have recognised her. In Americas Canada and several Latin American countries including Brazil and Argentina have diplomatic ties with Israel. Many African countries including Kenya and South Africa have also recognised Israel. Both China and India, two Asian giants also recognised the reality of Israel in 1992. All European nations maintain diplomatic ties with Israel.

Out of the Arab-Muslim countries Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Turkey and Uzbekistan maintain diplomatic ties with Israel. Others like Oman and Qatar have business relations while Morocco and Tunisia have low-level diplomatic relations. They all will, of course, rush for full diplomatic relations once the stampede for mass recognition starts. Moreover, Pakistan's decision in this regard will have significant effect on Muslim world. Interestingly, an animated debate is already underway in Pakistan where apparently a case is being built up in favour of recognition as evident from views expressed and



Reforming personal laws: Uniform code no magic wand



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

BY exhorting Parliament to enact a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), Chief Justice of India V.N. Khare has triggered a controversy. His statement isn't a judgment or ruling. He opined on a matter that didn't arise from the case before him. The other two judges constituting the Bench remained silent on the UCC.

Thus, Justice Khare's pronouncements don't fulfil the criterion for "judgment" under Article 145(5) of the Constitution. But that hasn't prevented a robust debate on the UCC.

Justice Khare holds that a UCC would promote "national integration" and should be enacted forthwith. This logic is flawed. For one, it is not for the courts, as distinct from Parliament, to decide how to promote national integration.

And for another, uniform laws about marriage, inheritance, etc. don't hold a special key to "integration". A society as plural and diverse as India's could well have

different personal laws -- so long as they are consistent with fundamental rights.

Hindutva supporters use the UCC as a stick to intimidate the religious minorities. They want it imposed without debate or consent. And Muslim conservatives stoutly oppose any change in personal laws. In between fall many who believe a UCC is desirable, but India is not ready for it -- "not yet".

All these positions are open to question. The case for common laws on marriage, divorce, succession, etc., arises not from

creating a welfare state, improving public health and nutrition, providing free education, guaranteeing the "right to work", under "just and humane conditions", promotion of international peace, etc. It's ludicrous to privilege Article 44 over the other 13 Principles.

Justice, especially gender equality, is all-important. All Indian personal laws are patriarchal and biased against women. Thus, a Hindu woman can rule India, but she cannot head the family! She cannot claim equal inheritance or a matrimonial home.

Marriage Act, 1954.

Equality is *paramount*. It must override custom, religious tradition or practice -- although religion often doesn't really sanction discrimination.

All religious communities have had mixed reactions to attempts to reform personal laws. In the early 20th century, Hindu leaders including Lokmanya Tilak opposed laws raising the minimum age of marriage and allowing widow remarriage. Later, enlightened Hindus tried to codify Hindu personal laws, resulting in new Acts

talaq, and two Supreme Court judgments (Shamim Ara and Danial Latifi cases).

One of these mandates payment of alimony to the divorced wife for life -- unlike in any other community. Groups like Majlis and Awaz-e-Niswaan say the vast majority of Muslim women want to change "laws which violate their rights".

This should settle the dishonest argument that Muslim personal law has never been modernised, and that Muslims are uniquely resistant to reform. In fact, there is modernising, secularising, progressive

size. They vote in larger numbers.

Muslim women are increasingly becoming aware of their rights -- and of legal reforms in many Muslim-majority countries. They are "intruding" into male preserves like the armed forces and theology.

Chamravattom, India's first village to become fully computer-literate is in Malappuram district on Kerala's Malabar coast, where Muslims form 40 per cent of the population. The first-ever woman driver of a city bus in Chennai is Hameeda Banu, a diploma-holder in mechanical engineering.

A modern professional middle class is crystallising among Indian Muslims which stands for progress and equality, and resists conservative Mullah-Maulvi leaders.

If *Hindutva*'s champions of personal law reform were really serious, they would have worked with this group, rather than use the UCC as instrument of chiding and coercion.

They shed crocodile tears over the plight of Muslim women, but are blind to Hindu women's growing oppression through bride-burning, female foeticide, and spread of *purdah*. Their *real* agenda has nothing to do with reform or justice.

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Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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"national integration", but from two other considerations: social justice and legal universality -- which says all citizens should be governed by common laws as far as possible.

India's Constitution-makers recognised the difficulty with an absolute, unqualified, UCC mandate. So they used soft language: "the state shall endeavour to secure a UCC ..." They placed Article 44 within the Directive Principles of State Policy, which are not enforceable by the courts, unlike fundamental rights.

The 14 substantive Directive Principles include worthy goals:

The children of a Parsi woman who marries a non-Parsi are considered non-Parsi, and cannot enter a Fire Temple. Not vice versa.

Muslim personal law allows for polygamy and doesn't demand a fair procedure for divorce nor obligates maintenance. Christians seeking divorce through mutual consent must suffer a longer separation period than non-Christians.

These laws violate requirements of elementary justice and Article 14 of the Constitution which prohibits discrimination. They must be reformed so that men and women have equal rights as in the Special

in the mid-1950s.

This led to an unseemly confrontation between Nehru and President Rajendra Prasad. The reform process ground to a halt.

Yet, many Hindus harbour the illusion that they have a uniform code, and there's no need for further reform. As the legal luminary H.M. Seervai held, "there is no common [Hindu] civil code". And there's no momentum for reform.

Muslims strongly protested the Shah Bano judgment. But they have since accepted pro-reform judicial verdicts, including a Bombay High Court judgment against "triple

change among India's Muslims.

A recent survey of nearly 10,000 Muslim women shows that differences in status -- educational, social-economic or in decision-making -- are attributable more to income, class or region than to religion. A Muslim woman is more likely to be illiterate because she is poor, *not because she is Muslim*.

Muslim women are less subject to domestic violence than Hindu women. They are more independent and mobile and have greater say in decisions about housing or family

OPINION

Indigenous people deserve our attention

SULAV BARUA

IT is now believed that civilisation has advanced beyond our imagination and we are eagerly waiting to see its ultimate thriving which perhaps will lead us to a state of complete bliss we have been dreaming of for long. But, as old saying goes, "there is a darker side under the fulgence of light". It is a true reminder that civilisation too has its darker influence on humankind. Still people on this earth live under the threat of being ousted and extinct. Still they are having to fight for establishment of their rights, inhabitation, governmental aids. In this lustre of civilisation, people still have to cry hoarse for protection of their culture. Yes, they, I am talking about, are the "indigenous people", living across the world, alongside the "mainstream" ones.

Bangladesh is rather lucky enough that it has a variety of tribes that carry the colours of indigenous credential. These people are living across the country and as a result, their lifestyles, philosophy, social customs and culture are directly helping to enrich our over all cultural scenario. This diversity of tribe and race is a wealth for a developing

country like Bangladesh, if we consider the matter from the anthropological point of view. Because, it signifies the cultural richness of our country.

All across the world, the indigenous people have been living through utmost agonies, pains and consternation, though in some developed countries like Australia, New Zealand, the situation is getting changed. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh we could not come up yet with appropriate steps for the betterment of condition of the indigenous people who are living under perceived threat of eviction. Neither governmental initiative nor private enterprise has been taken to listen to the agonies of these "aborigines". It is our great failure that despite being the people of a democratic country, we have not been able to pay heed to their demands. Sometimes, even we have tried to just overlook their afflictions because they are not directly linked to our mainstream culture and ideologies. Moreover, they are small sections of people left out without proper education, medication and democratic treatment. As such, it is often thought that it is not a big problem to deal with them when necessary in our 'self-interest'. But prevalence of this sort of belief in

government and other influential social institutions is harmful for the development of a nascent democracy.

The indigenous people are, most often, said to be remaining out of school and in the fallacy of superstition. Still, 95 per cent of indigenous people in Bangladesh are deprived of education. Unfortunately, they are the most unprivileged community in our country. They are addressed hardly by the newspapers and other media, they are hardly under the eye of NGOs to ameliorate their sufferings and even they are ignored by the government and the opposition. Now-a-days, some intellectuals, influential persons, liberal personalities of our country are raising their voice for the protection of the rights of the indigenous people, but it is a whopping truth that as long as no political attention is paid to this matter, nothing could alter their worrisome condition.

After the recognition of the indigenous people by the UN, the developed countries where aborigines are living in the face of extinction, have taken initiative to protect their religious belief, cultural variety, traditional customs, social ethos etc. By doing that they are contributing to

enrich their mainstream culture with variety. But Bangladesh seems to have remained reluctant on this issue and the government has not perhaps appointed any anthropological department or folklore society to conduct a research on the indigenous people across the country. But, if we did, we would be discovering their strong and mysterious social beliefs, rituals and cultural diversity. By running this research, we could have made our own culture further flourished with variety. I think, it is time to give a thought to it.

Of late, we have come across a protest from the Indigenous People's Forum that the government was trying to evict some indigenous people by having taken a decision for establishing an eco-park. I am not sure how much true it is,

but if it is the real motive, then we must say, it is inhuman, undemocratic and violation of human rights. No government has any right to evict the inhabitants for establishing a project without providing them with proper rehabilitation with a long-standing pecuniary solution. The government should remember that they may be indigenous people, but they are citizens of Bangladesh and they have every right to remain protected by their rights. We must

appeal to the government to act wisely and not to take any step to implement their plan, however good it is, overlooking the rights and problems of the indigenous people.

I dream of a beautiful tomorrow for the indigenous people when there will not be any discrimination, imparity and untoward incident against them. They won't be pushed to a situation where their survival will be impossible and which make the common people feel guilty. I believe a tomorrow will come when all these indigenous people will be educated and help the country to thrive economically. But, to transform this dream into a reality, we all have to come to one understanding that these indigenous people are the part of our culture and society, and we must do our utmost to make them better off. Now, noted figures of our country have raised their voices in support of the indigenous people and who knows, tomorrow hundreds of thousands of conscious citizens would not join forces. I like to believe that tomorrow is the far away.

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Lie does not pay

M AMIR ALI

IT has been well said that 'truth has always been the first casualty of war' and this has been once again quite amply demonstrated in the second Gulf war. The US president and his camp-follower the British prime minister concluded the unholy alliance to embark on a war of extermination on concocted plea against Iraq that it 'possessed weapons of mass destruction'. Bush and Blair made extensive propagandist Iraq was a menace to world peace and security particularly for USA though all the world knew that Iraq's president Saddam Hussein never posed any threat to anybody much less to USA and UK. Still the illegal war was begun against the advice of Security Council and disregarding also the world opinion thereby making a bad precedent for any member state to adopt such harmful stance.

This illegal war was based on wholesale lies with revolting cruelties of all kinds. Some very enlightened western journalists have very graphically depicted the brutality. In this context it is painful to recall that a state like Japan forgetting the past

awful tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by American Bombs has now turned up as an assertive protagonist of American aggression. Demonstrations against this war were held all over the world including Britain and USA but this could not deter Bush and Blair nor could the sublime sentiments of the founding fathers of America like Jefferson, Adams etc. embodied in the preamble of their constitution, "All men are endowed by their creator with some inalienable rights to life, liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness...". On the contrary they divided the world community into two hostile camps and also created rift between the Muslims and the Christians.

As no lies can long remain secret in a democratic society the colossal lie of Bush and Blair about the possession of weapons of mass destruction was brought to light putting them in insurmountable difficulties which they now confront at home and abroad.

Actuated by dishonest motive of perpetuating Anglo-American grip on the Arab world Bush-Blair have been ceaselessly protracting Saddam Hussein in the blackest of

hue but thanks to the honest efforts of some western journalists we have once again got a true colour of the event. Mr. Scot and Mr. John Pilger boldly expressed that, although an absolute autocrat, Saddam Hussein out of his oil income "created a welfare state of the highest order to help everybody to get the necessities of life and other amenities at a normal cost." According to the *Economist*'s intelligence unit "the Iraqi welfare state until recently was among the most comprehensive and generous in the Arab world".

Finally in this context we can say that man can lie but circumstances cannot. The awful nature of the Iraqi war has tremendously shaken the moral fabric of the world. The rhetoric of Bush and Blair of democracy and civil liberty can no longer mislead Iraqi people so they are clamouring for immediate withdrawal of the army of occupation and stoppage of the oil piracy and pillage. And everyday there's an American casualty in occupied Iraq.

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