

The holy month of Ramadan

Let's live up to its spirit

THE holy month of Ramadan begins with the Muslims preparing themselves for 30 days of fasting and self-abstinence in their quest for purification of the body and soul in the true sense of the term.

The month of *Siam* is believed to be one of the greatest blessings of Allah and it is observed with due solemnity by the devotees.

The month is especially significant in today's global context as violence and hostilities are taking a heavy toll of human lives. Only the high ideals of peaceful coexistence, tolerance and self-restraint that the spirit of Ramadan is all about can put an end to this intolerable situation which is but the result of mindless pursuit of antagonism and crass materialism.

One virtue of Ramadan is that it enables the affluent to experience the pangs of hunger and deprivation firsthand. Can there be a better way of feeling the miseries and sufferings of the poor and the under-privileged?

The government has taken some preemptive steps to counter lawlessness during the month. It has decided to deploy 40 squads of police, ansars, BDR and armed police in the city alone to combat crime.

Law and order has to be maintained to ensure the security of people. But the decision-makers must not be oblivious of the tremendous pressure that the latest price-hike is putting on people of limited means. Hoarding and market manipulation often take place during this month and people in general have to bear the brunt of it all. So alongside maintaining law and order, the government agencies concerned should see to it that people are not fleeced out of their hard-earned money by hoarders and profiteers.

The law enforcers must also address the problems caused by makeshift lftar stalls. Traffic congestion becomes unavoidable as public mobility increases manifold and stalls encroach deep on to the roads. Finally, health and hygiene standards have to be maintained. A vigil must be kept on the quality of lftar items sold. Adulteration of food needs to be checked.

The sanctity of the holy month will be best reflected by not only the respect that we show to those who fast but also by the commitment of all concerned to the welfare of society as a whole.

CHT affairs

A call for coordination

A meeting of the parliamentary standing committee for Chittagong hill tracts has stated the obvious: law and order and uplift efforts in the CHT are bedevilled by lack of coordination between various organisations and agencies involved in the area. Even between two apparatuses of the government one sees cooperation lacking, let alone among a multiplicity of them as happens to be the case with Chittagong hill tracts affairs. The CHT affairs minister, secretary to the ministry, the interim regional council, the parliamentary standing committee and the district administrations have not been working in synchronisation with each other. As a result, not merely routine administration and development activities are impaired, the fuller agenda of implementing the peace accord signed nearly six years ago goes by default.

The broader picture is missing in our approach to CHT affairs. The peace accord had envisaged four committees: advisory committee; agreement and development implementation committee; a task force; and land reform commission. Only the last two committees have been formed and are working. So, the institutional framework is not fully-fledged yet for handling the whole array of tasks: implementing a peace accord with its salient features of even-handed administration, land rights, peace and justice to all communities, all-round development of hitherto neglected areas and democratically elected district and regional councils.

If we have messed up with coordination between just a handful of agencies or committees, what would happen when the full complement of institutions will be in place? That is a very pertinent question that cries for an answer.

Meanwhile, what we need to do is to improve the law and order situation, resolve land disputes and carry forward development activities. There have been abductions and extortionist activities, a dreadful Mahalchhari-type inter-communal conflict, violence between pro-and-anti-peace accord elements and recovery of sophisticated weapons by security forces. As a result, the development pursuits in the region have been unnecessarily impeded. Let's not forget that sometime ago the UNDP had given green light to development funding following a favourable reassessment of the law and order situation. The uplift of the CHT region will be in the best interest of all communities.

The fate of Indo-Pak dialogue



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

Political expediencies may be resorted to by both sides for temporary gains. But for the gains of the millions on a permanent basis there is indeed no alternative to the dialogue which must be rescued before the offer of it dies down of neglect.

IN his characteristic boldness of holding out olive branch to the adversary, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, the septuagenarian Prime Minister of India, launched his fresh peace offensive on 18 April last while addressing a public meeting in Srinagar with a grandiose offer of unconditional 'talk on all issues' with Pakistan. It was in quick succession of his peace initiatives earlier when in 1999 he undertook his famous bus ride to Pakistan leading to Lahore declarations for good neighbourly relations between the arch-rivals of the subcontinent and engaged President Musharraf in much-hyped Agra summit in July 2001. Notwithstanding the failures of all those efforts all credits go to the Prime Minister who repeatedly opened up the window of opportunity to break Indo-Pak impasse. That he took calculated risk on making his latest peace overture was apparent from what he told the parliament only days later on May 02. "Now whatever happens will be decisive" adding "I am confident, I will succeed." On May 27, the Indian community in Berlin was assured, "this time the bus will not break down." He was ostensibly referring to his failed bus diplomacy that got mired in the bitterness over Kargil episode. In spite of a measure of circumspection he left no ambiguity about his historic mission: effecting a breakthrough in Indo-Pak deadlock before he soon passes into history. Pakistan's prompt and positive response made the prospect look brighter.

Yet the only tangible gains of Vajpayee's initiative so far have been the resumption of Delhi-Lahore bus service and the return of the high commissioners of the respective countries to their post to preside over grossly under-staffed missions. That the curbs were lifted by India after nearly three months of Vajpayee's overture reflects a niggardly notion of step-by-step approach which does not however fit in its Prime Minister's extraordinary gesture. The Samjhuta Express still remains suspended. So are the airlinks. Some soothing

diplomatic formulations are expected to be devised to remove the snags and someday those services will perhaps be restored.

But, what next? These are desirable steps, but the decisive test of the peace process is the resumption of a composite dialogue stalled since Agra. More specifically, when the leaders of the both countries will be able to talk on the light issues listed in the Islamabad joint statement of June 23, 1997 and repeated in the unsigned Agra declaration of July 16, 2001. In his offer although Vajpayee did not speak of a linkage between the 'talk' and 'cross border terrorism' his deputy Lal Krishna Advani underlined the point of conditionality by repeating the charge of 'infiltration' and the urgency of closing down the 'terrorists' camps." But the real punch then came from Vajpayee himself who in his recent speech at the UN seemed to have suggested that any talk/negotiation on Kashmir would be tantamount to negotiation on terrorism and would, as such, be betrayal of the Kashmiris who by participating in the election had expressed both determination and self-determination. Portending a new twist in his initiative Vajpayee now said, "when the cross border terrorism stops -- or when we eradicate it -- we can have dialogue with Pakistan on the 'other issues' between us." In saying so Vajpayee was clearly indicating that Kashmir, Pakistan's core issue for any talk, was not going to be in the agenda -- even if there may eventually be a dialogue between the two countries.

Mr Vajpayee's unexpected offer to resume talks and its instant, enthusiastic acceptance by Pakistan did not put an end to India's old refrain of cross border terrorism nor to Pakistan's charade of the brutal suppression of the freedom struggle in occupied Kashmir. The good will that the Indian Prime Minister's peace initiative could generate dissipated fast under the pressure or fear of the extremists in both countries. Coming in its wake, President Musharraf's emphatic reiteration of Pakistan's

known stand on Kashmir in the UNGA and Prime Minister Vajpayee's retort to it as "terrorists' blackmail" only emboldened the extremists in both the countries. Small wonder that the likes of VHP's Togadia in India openly professes subversion for Pakistan and General Hamid Gul, who took his lesson of politics in the ISI and his cohorts saw in Musharraf's UN speech a reversal of Kashmir policy from dialogue to arms and complimented the President for his courage. These are while the vast majority in both the countries worry about the effect the trend will have on the fate of Indo-Pakistan dialogue which is not as yet formally abandoned and certainly one to which hinges the wellbeing of the millions of the subcontinent.

The cynics say that Prime Minister Vajpayee's April peace initiative was prompted, among other things, by concerns that Washington had expressed about the rise in tension due to intemperate statements from Indian leaders calling for pre-emptive attacks on Pakistan. It was an imperative for India to assuage the anxiety of Washington which is strongly for Indo-Pak amity so that its global war on terror particularly one in Afghanistan is not hampered. India, it is said, has been adequately rewarded for the gesture. The Americans, welcoming the relaxation of tension, promptly withdrew their objections to the sale of Israeli Phalcon radar system to India. Moreover, the election next to year is a big factor in the decision making of Vajpayee who cannot afford to be 'soft' on Pakistan at this delicate time.

These are, however, political expediencies which may be resorted to by both sides for temporary gains. But for the gains of the millions on a permanent basis there is indeed no alternative to the dialogue which must be rescued before the offer of it dies down of neglect.

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Double-standard on bigotry

ZAFAR SOBHAN

MALAYSIAN Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's recent speech to the OIC and the fall-out from it are still news in the US. Paul Krugman recently came out with a column on the speech in the *New York Times*, and President Bush reportedly pulled Mahathir aside at the APEC summit in Bangkok to personally remonstrate with him over his comments, which Bush termed "wrong and divisive."

And so they were -- at least some of them. But Mahathir is not the only person who has been making statements that are 'wrong and divisive' lately, and observers in the Muslim world can be forgiven for thinking that there seems to be a double-standard in the US when it comes to offensive statements that are anti-Semitic and offensive statements that are anti-Muslim.

It has recently been reported that Lieutenant General William Boykin, deputy undersecretary of defence for intelligence in the US, has been quoted making statements besides which Mahathir's comments pale into insignificance.

Boykin apparently agrees with many in the Muslim world that, despite repeated protestations to the contrary from his president and other senior administration officials, the war against terrorism that the US is waging is indeed a war against Islam.

Referring to a skirmish between Delta forces under his command and a Muslim warlord in Somalia, the resolutely off-message Boykin has been quoted as saying: "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol."

This messianic conviction of Boykin's apparently informs his prosecution of the US war against terrorism, in which he, somewhat alarmingly, plays a major role. Last June, US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, tapped Boykin to head up the defence department unit responsible for tracking down terrorists.

Boykin has taken to his new assignment with literally religious fervour. In Boykin's mind: "Satan

Muslims around the world can be forgiven for taking this inconsistency as the latest evidence of what they have long believed -- that the war against terror is indeed conceived of by many in the US as a war against Islam, and that it is acceptable to make bigoted and offensive comments as long as they are anti-Muslim and not anti-Semitic.

wants to destroy [the US], he wants to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army."

Showing his audience slides of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Kim Jong Il, Boykin posed the question: "Why do they hate us?" before confidently providing the answer: "Because we're a Christian nation. We are hated because we are a nation of believers."

By any reasonable standard of judgement, Boykin's remarks are offensive and ignorant, and far worse than anything Mahathir said at the OIC summit. Mahathir may have railed against "the Jews" who "rule this world by proxy" but he did not go so far as to pour scorn on their religion and accuse them of worshipping a false god.

In fairness to the US media, Boykin has recently come under some fire for his intemperate words. Fareed Zakaria, writing in *Newsweek*, has called for him to be fired, and the *Washington Post* has issued an editorial calling on President Bush to criticize Boykin.

But the *New York Times*, which devoted an editorial to "Islamic Anti-Semitism," apparently remains unperturbed by anti-Muslim rhetoric from one of the senior officials in the US war against terrorism, and, in general, Boykin's inflammatory words have not hit the headlines the way that Mahathir's did.

One can argue that Boykin's words are more than merely offensive and that he has shown himself to be utterly unfit for the critical post in the war against terrorism that he holds.

But of course, far from firing him, President Bush, who took the time to rebuke Mahathir to his face and to widely publicise this fact, has not seen fit to criticize Boykin for the offensiveness of his comments and

clearly considers the issue of minor concern.

Last Wednesday, Bush finally -- if belatedly -- repudiated Boykin's comments. But his statement to reporters on Airforce One: "He didn't reflect my opinion. It just doesn't reflect what the government thinks." falls far short of the earful that Mahathir received, and indicates that, in Bush's eyes, Boykin's offence is the political damage he has done by casting the war against terrorism in religious terms, not that his statements are offensive to Muslims.

And of course Boykin retains his high-level position in the US department of defense. "Nobody's thinking about asking him to step aside," confirmed a spokesman for the department.

Meanwhile, Muslims around the world can be forgiven for taking this inconsistency as the latest evidence of what they have long believed -- that the war against terror is indeed conceived of by many in the US as a war against Islam, and that it is acceptable to make bigoted and offensive comments as long as they are anti-Muslim and not anti-Semitic.

I wouldn't go as far as the unrepentant Mahathir who smugly concludes that the reaction to his speech proves that Jews really do control the world (you have to give the man points forchutzpah if nothing else).

But Bush's silence with respect to Boykin's anti-Muslim bigotry does send the message that there is a disturbing double-standard in the US when it comes to offensive statements that are anti-Semitic and offensive statements that are anti-Muslim.

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Building a national consensus for economic reform

G M QUADER, MP

IN the present context of Bangladesh, the creation of new employment opportunities is considered to be the key to poverty alleviation. An increase in investment can pave the way for the creation of fresh job opportunities. For any new investment, the investor would like to see a suitable environment for investment. This includes infrastructural facilities, the role of government agencies as facilitator (and not as controller only) and last but not the least profit or return on his investment. In addition, the investors in Bangladesh have a new concern -- the deteriorating law and order situation.

Good governance is a necessity for achieving the above goal of providing a suitable climate for investment. The government must take the lead for economic, administrative and any other reform measures. But the cooperation of all the other political parties is also required. At the same time, the support of the people of Bangladesh at large is vital, which of course depends to a great extent on the role of the political parties. There comes the question of national consensus. In Bangladesh today there exists a consensus that we need good governance, we need alleviation of poverty, we need social justice and fulfillment of basic needs. We have little difference amongst different political parties on how to accomplish this at least in the broader perspective. But, by and large, the government lacks credibility about its ultimate intentions. The other political parties and the people at large are suspicious as to whether the government takes the reform measures with a sincere desire for establishing good governance. Most of the

time, the opposition political parties and the public at large do not think so. There is a perception that the government's ultimate intention is to serve some selfish personal or partisan interest. The most unfortunate thing is that this happens to be true in almost all cases in Bangladesh.

So, in order to implement any reform the initial step is to ensure that the government does something with

privilege of taking the parliament's support as guaranteed. As such, the parliament's role as watch dog to the government activities as stipulated in the above clause of art. 53 (3), has been made ineffective by the subsequent clause as stipulated in art. 70 (1). The said anomaly has given the government a free hand in managing the affairs of state without any accountability to the people through their elected representatives in parliament.

In reality, this has allowed subsequent governments under the existing system to misuse their authority and run the country in an autocratic style without any fear of answerability towards the people of Bangladesh. The result is lack of transparency and an environment where corruption and irregularity thrive. This may be considered a major reason for the mistrust of the activities of the government by other political parties and also by the people of the country. Unfortunately, this has been true for not only the

present government but also all the past governments of the country. As such, a change of government alone may not be able to create confidence amongst the political parties and the people about the role of the government. A change of system is necessary to make the parliament more powerful and also more effective in controlling the government, and making it accountable to the people

Interestingly, the magnitude of election manipulation is increasing with the passage of time as subsequent election results seem to be more manipulated compared to previous ones. Also, it is observed that the ways and means of manipulation and influencing of election results are being changed continuously with the objective of outwitting the supervisory bodies.

money is playing a very important role in determining election results under the existing system. Naturally, there remains an element of doubt as to whether the wishes of the people are allowed to be projected correctly.

This has added a new dimension to the governance issue. Not only are the results declared by the election commission rejected by the opposition political parties who lost the election, the tendency of the new government is to become one who patronizes armed musclemen and black money holders. This further confirms that the reason for their victory was the use of force and illegal money and not the desire of the people. This has degenerated into a scenario of constant increase of influence of musclemen and black money holders including their rise in number in national politics. The result is what should have been expected, the constant deterioration of law and order as is very evident from daily newspaper reports. Is it possible to build a national consensus on any issue under a government elected in such an election and in the existing environment? As such, the election system needs to be modified to correctly reflect the wishes of the people.

Building a national consensus for economic reform is a necessity for Bangladesh for poverty alleviation and for attaining sustainable development. But unless a credible government elected as per the true reflection of the people's wishes can be established and its activities can be made transparent and accountable to the people through their elected representative in the national parliament, a national consensus for economic reform will remain a mirage.

The use of armed miscreants as party cadres and also the use of black

How does the future look like for Vajpayee?

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

INDIAN prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has just completed fourth year as the head of the present government in the current five-year term. Unlike his past stints as the prime minister, he has faced little challenges and problems this time politically although his physical condition has no doubt caused some concerns. As he stepped into the final year of the tenure leading a multi-party coalition called national democratic alliance (NDA) government, the 78-year old leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the driving force of the ruling rainbow alliance, eyes on a return to power through the coming national elections which will take place by October next year. Some analysts feel that polls may be advanced and can be held as early as in February or March, but there is little doubt that the voting will take place at the will of the government even if at all advanced than scheduled. For, there is nothing as

such that may force the government for seeking an early verdict barring totally unforeseen developments, which once again seem remote in the present circumstances.

Atal Behari Vajpayee began his political life as an activist of the RSS, the hardline Hindu nationalist movement, and later made his mark as a leader of the "Jan Sangh", the broad political forum of the RSS and similar parties. A fiery orator, who still at this age is capable of keeping the audience somewhat spell-bound, Vajpayee tasted power as the external affairs minister in the Janata Party government that came following Indira Gandhi's controversial Emergency rule. Jan Sangh was merged into the new party along with some other organisations but the government could not complete its term despite a resounding victory against Congress in the polls because of internal squabbles. However, Vajpayee was credited with success as the foreign minister and it was during that Janata Party rule that New Delhi's ties with small neigh-

bours were better and he initiated normalisation of relationship with China, strained for long after the 1962 border clash.

As the Janata Party collapsed, the former Jan Sangh men formed the new party -- Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) -- on a communal overtone. This BJP with only two seats in the lower house of parliament (Loksabha) gained a meteoric rise in Indian politics over the last two decades riding mainly on communal sentiments and it is now the biggest party in the parliament, albeit it did not command enough majority to form a government by itself. It needed the support of several parties -- mostly regional for coming to power. Vajpayee was prime minister in the first stint for only twelve days as the BJP failed to prove majority in the house while his second term as the

premier was cut short halfway mainly because of withdrawal of support by Jayaram Jayalalitha's AIDMK party from NDA.

The present NDA government, no doubt, has so far a good innings politically since it faced no major threat to its existence either from the opposition or owing to internal problems. Indeed, it is a big success since the government has more than twenty parties and not that all have similar policies on vital matters. True, leaders like Ram Vilas Paswan of Bihar quit ministerial post on the issue of communalism but this did not affect the government much. Mamta Banerjee of the "Trinamul Congress" of West Bengal parted ways with the government but not with the NDA as she later returned to the fold realising that it remains best option for her. Mamta's return has been a shot in the

arms for Vajpayee, who can afford not wooing the leaders of the NDA all the time. Defence minister George Fernandes, a close associate of Vajpayee and known as a trouble shooter for the prime minister, himself was embroiled in the "Tehelka dot.com" scandal forcing him to quit as minister, but staged a comeback a few months later. All these augured well finally for the NDA. The economy is reasonably stable and India was seen as better placed diplomatically following the Afghanistan developments, and ties with some countries including China moved a step forward. As such, Vajpayee has reasons to look back with satisfaction.

But there are several thorns as well in the bed of roses. Main opposition Congress won most of the state assembly elections wrestling positions from the BJP, which also lost

power a few months ago in largest Uttar Pradesh state, where it had formed the government and later supported BSP in power. Now Mulayam Singh Yadav of SP, who firmly believes in the secular politics, is the chief minister there. Italian-born Congress president Sonia Gandhi is increasingly asserting herself raising prospects of better result in next polls. The centre and left parties are clamouring against the BJP for its "communal" approach on many matters. The recent visit of Israeli prime minister to India was disliked by the Muslims and criticised by most opposition parties. Vajpayee, seen as a liberal in the BJP in contrast to deputy premier L. K. Advani, often comes at loggerheads with militant Hindu zealots like the Shiv Sena and the VHP but himself also seeks to

placate them occasionally. Understandably, he cannot afford to distance himself from them who form the power base of the BJP.

Vajpayee's communal statements have not helped his image. Many hardliner prefer Advani to him but Vajpayee has the charisma which Advani lacks largely. The prime minister could not demonstrate much sagacity in containing violence in Kashmir region nor there has been progress in settling tensions with arch-rival Pakistan, which, however, is a complex task. Indo-Pakistan cricket matches could not be resumed mainly because of New Delhi's intransigence even though most Indians and Pakistanis want to keep sports out of politics. Cricket is a passion in South Asia. However, Vajpayee's willingness to attend the next SAARC summit in Islamabad despite unsatisfactory ties with Pakistan is commendable. The summit has already been delayed. The prime minister is not in the best

of his health after a knee surgery. But the BJP and the NDA say there is no reason for concern for his health.

Many analysts feel that he has an undercurrent of tensions and rivalry with Advani, which was denied by both but many believe the rivalry exists. Several partners in the NDA differ with the major party BJP on the communal issues since the BJP is often seen as siding with communal militants on the Ayodhya Ram Temple issue. The prime minister's difficulties include keeping the alliance intact. But Atal Behari Vajpayee seems firm in the saddle even though he has many odds. He appears well placed to complete full term as the premier and also swing into next electioneering despite being handicapped by physical problems. However, he is set to face a more determined opposition when national polls are held.

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