

## Crisis deepens in Sri Lanka

*A set-back to peace initiative*

THE mercury of Sri Lankan politics rises and dips without much pre-warning, as is the case with nations plagued by sectarian and centrifugal tensions. Days after Tamil Tigers offered to share power, something went fatally wrong in the island nation. President Kumaratunga exercised her prerogatives boding what looks like a constitutional coup on November 4 while the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister were on an official visit to Washington.

The peace process has been in danger for some time due to an ongoing tug of war between a constitutionally powerful president and a prime minister hailing from a different political platform. But none expected the danger to come to roost at a time when the peace process evolved into something concrete under the Norwegian stewardship and cooperation from many others of the international community. Even funds were allocated for the reconstruction of an economy that had festered amid fratricidal warfare lingering since the mid 1970s,

The sacking of the defence, interior and information ministers is indicative of the President's unease with the peace deal that had been diligently worked out with international partners. Obviously, she did not look kindly on the peace deal's 'consent' to accepting the minority Tamils' rights to run their own affairs, excepting national defence and foreign policy.

The crisis has all the familiar ring of a constitutional instability, especially after the suspension of the parliament. It has been highlighted by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's harsh criticism of the president's move from his 'involuntary exile' in Washington. Like the LTTE, Wickremesinghe too cautioned that the president's move will scuttle the peace deal.

What seems evident is that the president had acted in desperation. If the parliament is not revived, the island nation will be thrown into a deeper constitutional crisis with the prospect of peace cast adrift into a newer gray area.

## Retail prices still up

*Consumers continue to feel the pinch*

AS we enter the 10th day of Ramadan, wholesale vegetable prices have come down but the retail price of essential vegetables remains beyond the reach of many consumers.

The fact that wholesale prices have recently dropped to somewhere near their seasonal averages indicates that the problem does not lie in that sector of the market. Retailers complain that their prices reflect the fact that they have to bear costs such as transportation and rent, but this is unpersuasive as these costs must be borne by them at all other times too. If wholesale prices drop there is no reason that retail prices should not follow suit, the self-serving justifications of retail traders notwithstanding.

Indeed the suspicion was always that the sudden spiralling of prices had more to do with market manipulation and profit maximization than with the simple laws of supply and demand. With the present anomaly between wholesale and retail prices this seems even more apparent.

Nor does the government's role in this debacle fill us with any confidence. The commerce ministry's pronouncements on the matter have been contradictory at best and incoherent at worst.

Only last week the commerce minister visited a couple of kitchen markets before declaring that prices were normal for Ramadan. To top it off, he blamed the media for exaggerating the situation.

Earlier, of course, he had suggested that there was little the government could actually do to control prices which merely reflected supply and demand in the market, and earlier still he had complained that the price spiral was partly due to the finance ministry's refusal to lower the duty on imported items.

Last week we wrote that we were waiting for a coherent official policy statement on the matter. We are still waiting.

M. SHAHIDUL ISLAM

BREAKING the restraining tradition of the month, guns rattled to silence voices of aggrieved garment industry workers inside Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) enclave in Fatullah. The industrial village is seething with discontent since November 3 after police fired over 200 bullets, arrested 20, killed one and injured 300 (20 by bullets, including four women) to quell a workers' rampage. The deceased was identified as Kamaluddin (25). Police also locked and beat dozens of female workers.

Over the last 72 hours, damages to buildings, factories, shops and vehicles were countless. In a BBC interview, a spokesperson of the knitwear manufacturers' association blamed a vested group for trying to destroy the country's garment sector. Workers' representative, Ismail, however maintained that a few owners were hurting the industry's interests and workers were victimised. Politically, a motley alliance of 11 leftist parties expressed explicit support for the workers while the state machinery seemed to have backed the industry's owner from the outset.

The politics of the incident would have ended here if nothing flew beneath the surface. Hence, a number

of theories should be tested to explain the mayhem and its genesis. The essential tips are: authorities' mishandling of the situation; conspiracy to stir trouble in the most promising sector of the economy (RMG); flaws in dispute settlement mechanism; and the machination of some to create instability to achieve partisan political goals.

Apparently, mismanagement and

other BSCIC enclaves and EPZs.

Any disruption in the functioning of these sensitive units portends danger for the nation's economy and politics. These cluster of industries attracted nearly \$638 million worth of foreign investment so far, and, according to the last count, fetched over 45 per cent of the country's export earnings during previous years.

despite their interjection into the fray, in the dead of night.

What followed seemed like a replay of Murphy's Law: "If something can go wrong, it will." The final straw came when labour leader, Advocate Mahbubur Rahman Ismail, was implored over phone to join the dialogue by government officials, only to be arrested and taken to the thana prison after the negotiation hit a snag.

With respect to the wage, for which a worker sheds his sweat, the pay structure seems independent of the 'minimum wage' threshold that the ministry of labour was supposed to have imposed.

Labour unrest like this does occur due to the lack of regulatory mechanism crafted and modified from time to time through painful haggling among government

However, all this does not preclude the constitution of a judicial inquiry committee to unearth the truth. The investigation body must seek: (1) Whether the demands of the workers were legitimate under existing job contract (2) What led the owner to lodge a complaint with local police and what were alleged in specific terms? (3) How did the magistrates and district officials get involved in the negotiation process? (4) Who ordered the arrest of Ismail, the labour leader, and his incarceration inside Fatullah police station? (5) Based on minimum wage and the hours of work per day, did the owner owe money to the workers? (6) Were the workers right in claiming that their fundamental rights were infringed upon and violated by the management? (7) Did the police behave rationally and proportionally before indulging in a shooting spree?

And, to avoid the recurrence of similar incidents, executions of labour, wage and safety regulations must be a priority from now on. The workers deserve to be paid in time and in the amount prescribed. Barbarism reaches its height when bullets and brutality greet demands that are considered worth listening to. It might be one death, but it is too many in the context of the dispute.

Author and columnist M. Shahidul Islam is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

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flaws in dispute settlement seem to have sparked the inferno. The workers demanded payment of unpaid wage and overtime works. They also sought Eid bonus and few other privileges. They cited price hikes as reasons for seeking extra cash and bonuses.

The management refused to budge. The incident involved workers of two sister units only-- Pantex and Starlace-- from among a cluster of 250 such industrial outlets housed in the BSCIC village. The workers threatened to block goods moving out of the unit. The EPZ- like industrial village employs over 100,000 people and processes about 20 percent of the country's exports in conjunction with

Reports say the owner of the factory registered a complaint with local police as the unrest mounted in preceding days. That's fine. But the efforts of three magistrates and other district officials in the dispute settlement process seem to have backfired and further complicated the situation.

After all, the police would not have fired upon the crowd if the magistrates did not consent to it. Nor would they arrest the labour leader. Besides, negotiators from the executive organ of the state should have known the consequence of the owner not complying with workers' demands. And that's what had happened

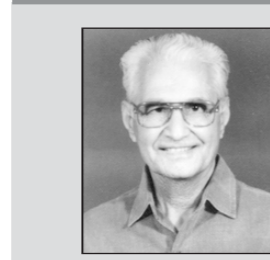
Such being the backdrop, it brings to the fore a moot issue relating to the quality of governance as was exhibited in this instance; jointly by the magistrates, police and other district officials. Despite licenses to operate BSCIC industrial outlets being contingent upon meeting specific criteria with respect to work hours, minimum wage and safety regulations, the management - worker relationship is not governed as yet by those uniform codes.

Then again, one observes the operatives of trade unions being vibrant in some industries while others deride such rights as 'ganging up' of workers against entrepreneurs.

representatives, entrepreneurs and labour leaders. In such tripartite agreement, standard hours of work are clearly defined, in sync with internationally accepted labour hours. Our industries are yet to follow such regulations scrupulously.

Moreover, overdue wage, if any, should have been paid up -- or deferred amicably -- by the management to avoid the situation from degenerating into something so tragic and painful. If the management failed to redress labour grievances pursuant to job contracts, the onus of a backlash would be deemed to have rested on the owner and management alone.

# Scourge of sectarianism



M B NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

ASSASSINATION of Maulana Azam Tariq of *Sipah-e-Sahaba* and subsequent demos underscore the strength and extent of sectarianism. The phenomenon of sectarianism among the Muslims is routinely and superficially excoriated in political discourse without being aware of its strength or roots. The governments of the day after every incident tighten up security, express fierce determination to wipe sectarianism out and order immediate arrest of the killers of that most recent incident. Many others say it is the government's failure; its many intelligence agencies remain busy in dubious politics-related work. Nothing really happens or is done that can counter this menace.

The phenomenon's origins and the processes that nourish it need to be investigated. Philosophically, sectarianism is an aspect of religious intolerance. There is not much to distinguish between those who attack a Church and kill Christians, or Hindus for that matter, and those who kill Sunnis or Shias. They are all soul mates. Often the sectarian groups and anti-Hindu or anti-Ahmedi or anti-Christian groups are the same people. The bigotry against the 'other' is the mother of the evil.

But knowing that alone will not take us far. The politics and sociological facts that give birth to the aggravated intolerance of all 'others' -- 'accept my faith and all my ideas or be outside the pale' -- need to be dispassionately studied. Unless the causes of the perception of growing distance from 'others' and the emergence of active hatred are clearly understood, ways and means of accommodation among all religious and sectarian groups

cannot be found.

Many cannot understand why should a large Sunni majority feel threatened by, and be so angry with, a small Shia minority. They have lived together peaceably for generations without many incidents. That same can be said for Ahmeds or Hindus or Christians. The cognisable fact today is that Pakistani society is characterised by many hatreds inside it and several resulting polarisations. Sectarianism's potential being horrific, its prevalence and constant aggravation through

always clearly enunciated -- of Islam, a Muslim Nationalism conceived in communal or anti-Hindu terms, and a vague enthusiasm for pan Islamism causes. The emergence of Pakistan put the orthodox *Ulema* in a difficult situation, however.

Remember the *Jamiat-e-Ulmai Hind* was against both the League and partition; its Islam could live happily in a secular India on the basis of a secular Indian nationalism. Not many Shias favoured partition either; in 1946 polls Mr. Jinnah had to fight in his own

anyone can see the origins of rampant hypocrisy in this country.

Islamicist *Ulema's* argument was devastatingly simple, if also historically wrong: Pakistan was created in the name of Islam. It therefore has to be an Islamic state based on Quran and Shariah. There is mighty little literature to show why an effort to do so will be dangerous or inadvisable, except for a few remarks of AK Brohi and the Punjab Riots Inquiry Commission's Report written by Justices Mohammad Munir and MR

Mullah. Secondly, no entitlement to power or wealth was attached to the debates among *Ulema*. So all could take these interminable debates in their stride. Not so in Pakistan. *Ulema* have tried their best to force the issue. Here the power of the state for one sect and perpetual subordination of others could be seen to be at stake. Think of the consequences.

All this confusion arose because of men like Sir Syed, Maulana Mohamed Ali, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Sir Mohammad Iqbal. They were acutely

## PLAIN WORDS

**The scourge of sectarianism needs to be fought at the roots by creating simple democracy, unadorned with any objective, where all voters are equal and elect regional constituencies' representatives who will be happy to create, and live, in a polycentric society with the rule of democratically-conceived (secular) laws. All privileged sections of society will have to be divested of their power and privilege.**

escalating incidents of gruesome nature frightens all decent persons who are not sold on any communal identity. The latter is either simple human beings or plain undifferentiated (by sects) Muslims.

So where and how did the latter-day sectarianism arise? One is not concerned with the original Medieval schism of Shias and Sunnis. Muslims everywhere learnt to shake down into a peaceful coexistence long ago. During the Pakistan Movement there was no consciousness of Shias and Sunnis. Indeed the large Sunni masses warmly responded to the call of Quaid-i-Azam who was a Shia, if also non-observant kind, and forced the partition of India on the British and Congress leadership. There had long been Sunni and Shia *Ulema* who flourished on sectarian rhetoric. But the society at large tolerated the phenomenon more or less good humouredly, except some politics-related incidents in a place like Lucknow. The ferocity of sectarian feelings that is in evidence today is to a new thing and is certainly politics-related.

Let us go back to Pakistan of 1947-48. Muslim League and its government brought with them a largely empty rhetoric -- except for an anti-Hindu and anti-India content that was not

constituency against Hussainbhai Lalji who was the President of All India Shia Federation. The point of it all is that League was not a religious party. Indeed it was quite secular, though it was concerned with only the interests of Muslim community, political and economic.

All the followers of *Jamiat-e-Ulmai Hind* in Pakistan areas and their allies like the Ahrars or minor variations on Jamiat's view of Islam -- such as the fledgling Jamat-i-Islami -- had bitterly denounced Jinnah and his League. Maulana Attaullah Shah Bukhari, possibly taking a hint from a younger Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, suddenly raised the demand of an Islamic State based on making Quran and Sunnah as the defining principle of statehood probably in 1948. That had a lasting resonance, though no political authority or government ever could accept or reject it ever since. Credit for whatever intellectual work was done on a uniquely Islamic State must go to Maulana Maududi and to a European scholar Lepold Asad (originally Weisse). Demand for Nizam-i-Islam remains hard to swallow by secular politicians or the military who do rely on Islamic rhetoric down to this day. But no one has openly opposed it -- wherein

Kayani in 1954. *Ulema's* case is simple: 'come to us. We will tell you what to do. We know what Islam is. Learn it from us'. In any case, the first practical question is the definition of Islam. And sequentially who is to define or explain it?

Sunnah, the indispensable elaboration of Quran, is uncodified; few can agree on which tradition, or *revayat* is authentic and which is not. Indeed sectarianism is born just here. Each sect has a distinct body of Prophet's saying or *revayat*. Each authentic or orthodox definition of Islam is, ipso facto, sectarian. Fact is there is no common Islam among various sects; each has its own version. Each claims its sect's Islam is the true and eternal and is the only one and no compromise or ad hoc homogenisation is permissible. All other versions, even if they differ only slightly, are false and are works of Satan.

Now, as one said, so long as these matters were discussed in a purely theoretical context, the society, already quite plural, could accommodate them all. Sectarianism never became a serious menace before 1947 for two reasons: First it was a largely theoretical debate; most people's lives or livelihood were not affected, except for the bread and butter of individual

conscious of belonging to the Muslim community. But they were relaxed about not being too orthodox or observant. They talked of what was a homogenised, non-sectarian Islam which can march with the times and cope with the situation created by Muslims' loss of power. In the Indian context they ended up by encouraging a separatist Muslim communalism that did not arise from any Islamic tenet but was linked to the chances of power-sharing.

That communalism was related to India's social and political conditions; it was misplaced in Pakistan where over 80 percent were Muslims. *Ulema's* Islam had to be ipso facto sectarian, it too will not do. There was a secular element also. But it was tiny one, being a small part of a small middle class at the time of partition. It was largely the Muslim part of Indian Left that immigrated into Pakistan. They heard and saw the Deobandi *Ulema's* argument and were instantly dispirited because it sounded so ostensible. They soon gave up the whole fight. It was partly because most of them came as refugees and had too little local support. Anyway, the Left did formally start work but without challenging the religious Right. In part the Muslim League and military

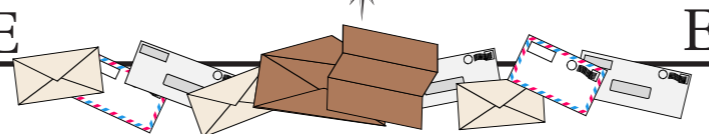
governments -- the secular Right -- rendered them ineffective with American expertise. In part they lacked the courage to take on the US-supported Right, both secular and *Ulema*.

The secular Right, in its infatuation with American aid, poverty of thought and Kashmir dispute's vicissitudes, surrendered democracy quickly. At any rate, they were half-heartedly secular or democratic, dependent on an Islamic rhetoric and the communal concept of Muslim Nationalism. How could they behave like humanists believing in human equality and making human rights and welfare their criteria? Only such humanists can create a truly free and plural society devoted to material human welfare. It is in such a dispensation that sectarianism can be contained. The worst sin of secular Right is that it allowed the religious Right to keep the initiative in politics and themselves were always apologetic.

*Ulema*, after the military's ministrations in the 1980s and 1990s, now scent power. They are on the march. But their aim of enforcing Shariah is a self-destruct formula for Pakistan. For, any Shariah they enforce will be a sectarian one, based probably on Deobandi concepts and traditions. Let alone Shias, even the Bareilvi school of Sunnis or *Ahle Hadis* will not accept it. Other sects' rejection will be total. An unending vista of contention and conflict will open up. Indeed the current crop of sectarianism may only be a trailer, the main film will be far more terrifying. The scourge of sectarianism needs to be fought at the roots by creating simple democracy, unadorned with any objective, where all voters are equal and elect regional constituencies' representatives who will be happy to create, and live, in a polycentric society with the rule of democratically-conceived (secular) laws. All privileged sections of society will have to be divested of their power and privilege. Let all be treated equally -- in their own rule.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Party differs, not policy

In my opinion, the present state of politics (politicians claim that they are all for democracy) in Bangladesh will only lead us to nothing but destruction and the time is not very far. Unless something is done to stop undemocratic practices now, it can never be stopped. Education is down the drain, Mafia rule is the order of the day, economy is in tatters and utility services are one of the most corrupt and poor in the whole world. Basic human necessities such as shelter, safe drinking water, health care etc. are becoming scarce for majority of the population. Is there anything that we can look forward to for this country of ours?

Our politicians and leaders would say that ours is a poor country and there is a limit to what can be done. Were we so poor 30

to 35 years back in comparison to Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and other south Asian economies? Ours was a stronger economy than that of many others at that time.

Who has brought it down to whatever the country is today? It is our politicians and leaders then and now, all belonging to the same coterie are root cause of this situation. They may look different in their Mujib coats, safari suits or military uniforms but they have one thing in common. They have competed very well in bringing down this nation to its near ruin. **Jiban Chowdhury**  
*Melbourne, Victoria*

### Wrong national priorities?

One can readily agree with Mr. Azad Miah ("Wrong priorities beset the nation", The Daily Star,

November 3) that our culture of hartals and tea-stall gossip may have something to do with our failures as a nation. But he does not go far enough.

The list of our failures is long but the stifling of the spirit of inquiry, the thwarting of the critical and creative mind, certainly deserves a special place on it. That sorry milieu is, in turn, being fostered by a number of factors. The relentless spread of traditional *madrasah* education, while knowledge languishes, and the rapid rise of religious fundamentalism in the country, may be foremost among them. But let us be generous and assign a role here to those who are supposed to lead the nation. Political leaders vie against each other in upholding dogma while a pusillanimous press is horrified at the tamest

criticism of religious orthodoxy.

Ironically, has Mr. Miah himself been completely free of the old mould? His "we Muslims" lament, for a nation that has over ten million non-Muslim citizens, seems to suggest otherwise. **Mahfuzur Rahman**  
*On e-mail*

### Looking forward for followups

It is with alarm that I read your story on the threats made by the fundamentalists in Kushia against Qadiani Muslims. Whatever these fundamentalists think of Qadianis, no one has the right to persecute others for their religious beliefs. Such occurrences only lend credence to foreign perceptions that Bangladesh is in danger of becoming a Taliban-style state. I hope you will continue to follow up on this story.

**Zeeshan Hasan**  
*London School of Economics, UK*

### Schools in Ramadan

Ramadan is the holy month for the Muslims all over the world and it has lots of other significance too. In this month the Muslims usually live a regular and pious life than that of others. But a real worry arises during this period, and that is the schedule of children's school. They tend to be open even two or three days before Eid, which causes enormous problem to the respective parents. Parents especially the mothers, have to prepare the *sehri* and get up again to drop their children in the school in time. I do respect the feelings of the school authority but they do have to care about the religious importance of the month as well.

My daughter is very young and

she wants to fast but thinking about her school, I discourage her (which I should not be doing). I would like to make a request to the respected school authorities that it would be very convenient if they remain closed from the second week of the holy month of Ramadan, which might give the parents a little bit of respite. **Badal Hasib**  
*Mohammadpur, Dhaka*

### Iraq in pandemonium

Saddam regime is over in Iraq. But what is the destiny of the Iraqi people? They are not supplied with enough water, electricity and other everyday necessities. Rudimentary infrastructure has been battered. Though Iraq has plenty of oil, its people are now starving. Ambush and counter

ambush have become very common in the main cities of Iraq like Falluja, Basra, Mosul and Tikrit. Mr Bush should keep in mind that Iraq is not Afghanistan. US has set Afghanistan as a satellite state. But Iraqi people are not ignorant like Afghans. They are rebellious and conscious. Mr Bush should hand over his jurisdiction to the UN to oversee Iraq until a new government is formed. **Molla Mohammad Shaheen**  
*Dept of English, Dhaka University*

### BBC

The other day I had the opportunity of listening to the interview of the BBC Bengali transmission news presenter with the union leader of Bangladesh Bank, CBA General Secretary Mr Joynal Abedin. I was amazed at the way the General Secretary was speak-

ing as if he is the guardian of BB "family" claiming his or his colleagues' right to barge in the office of the Governor of the central bank of the country. From the interview it transpired how unruly, disrespectful and arrogant they are.

The country as a whole cannot afford such behaviour jeopardising the functioning of the Central Bank and its officials, putting in danger the country along with the monetary system.

My plea to the media, the government and the political parties of the country is not to allow such lack in discipline in one of the most vital organisations of the country. Bangladesh Bank and the government must not be complacent about this dangerous situation. **Concerned citizen**  
*Dhaka*