

Barbarism in Banshkhali

This atrocity cannot go unpunished

THERE are no words sufficient to express the shock and disgust we feel at the burning to death of 11 members of one family including seven women and a newborn by robbers in Banshkhali Wednesday. Similarly, no words of sympathy we can express to the sole surviving family member can compensate for his grievous loss or do justice to the heinousness of the act.

We would like to note the commendable reaction of the government to news of this atrocity. The prime minister sent condolences from Saudi Arabia where she is performing umra and the home minister helicoptered to the site to oversee the police investigation.

But protestations of shock and horror cannot be the extent of the government's response. It should be noted that an almost identical outrage was perpetrated in Banshkhali in May and one in Patiya in August. Claims that law and order are a top priority are ultimately unconvincing if such atrocities continue unchecked.

The question we would like the authorities to answer is what protection is there for rural families such as the one victimised in Banshkhali. After all, merely catching the perpetrators offers no comfort to those who have lost their lives and the authorities must ensure that crimes such as these do not occur in the first place.

The fact that the house was set on fire so soon after the robbers arrived indicates that perhaps robbery was not the sole motive, and it remains unclear whether the robbers arrived with incendiary materials or not. The police have been quick to announce that robbery was the only motive, but it seems appropriate to ask whether this issue has been sufficiently investigated and why the rush to such a premature conclusion.

It is still too early to come to any definite conclusion as to the motive behind the crime and the perpetrators and there are clearly many questions that need to be answered. We urge the authorities to take every possible step to get to the bottom of this outrage and leave no stone unturned in their investigation to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The strategy of call and reject!

What are we to make of these mixed signals?

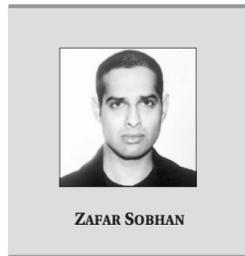
THE Americans followed the strategy of "Shock and awe" in the starting phase of their Iraqi invasion. The BNP seems to be following the strategy of "Call and reject" while dealing with the main opposition. Or that is what it appears to us to be. On the last day of the just concluded parliament session BNP secretary general and LGRD minister, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan called upon the opposition to end its standoff and return to the parliament. He asked the Speaker to extend special invitation to the opposition to return to the House saying, "We are ready to do whatever you ask us to do, to solve the problem." This was the call.

Then came the rejection. The Speaker rejected all of 150 notices given by the opposition proposing discussion on general situations, including law and order, price rise, situation in the munga hit areas, etc. Whatever may be his reasons the political message of the Speaker's rejection of all opposition notices cannot contribute to narrowing the existing political gap between the treasury and the opposition benches that is crippling the workings of the parliament. It may be mentioned here that it is not for the first time that opposition notices have been rejected.

So the natural question is, does the ruling party really want a rapprochement with the opposition or all this is for public consumption? For the BNP secretary general to call for opposition participation in parliament and for the Speaker to reject all the latter's notices in the House cannot be termed to be actions designed to reinforce one another. Either the BNP has no clear policy to deal with the opposition or the ruling party is putting one face out for the public while having a totally different one in reality.

We have been critical of the Speaker's attitude towards the opposition in the past. The recent events give no reason to change our views. There is a need for a radical change of attitude and mind-set of both the Treasury and the Opposition benches for our parliament to become effective. So far there is no sign of that.

It's not anti-Americanism, it's anti-Republicanism



ZAFAR SOBHAN

I don't often find myself in agreement with much that pop stars have to say about the state of the world, but British singer Elton John's words at a benefit concert last month hit the nail right on the head.

Dennis Miller the one-time comedian from Saturday Night Live who has bizarrely chosen to reincarnate himself as the Bush administration's court jester had just finished one of his typical sets in which he denigrated liberals, Arabs, Muslims, and non-Americans in general.

Before he sat down to perform, John remarked, "This night is about charity -- not washing your dirty political laundry. I love America, but if you want to know why the world hates America, I can give you two words: Dennis Miller."

To which I would like to add two more: Charles Krauthammer.

Krauthammer is the reliably conservative commentator whose screeds against liberalism and tolerance regularly darken the back page of *Time* magazine. His latest turn is a relentlessly ill tempered and bile-filled outpouring in this week's *Time* entitled: The US Gets No Sympathy. Should It Care?

Krauthammer's piece is a classic of unintended irony. It is filled with

arrogance and contempt and condescension and is an unwittingly brilliant illustration of what it is about America that the rest of the world dislikes. Krauthammer is ostensibly writing a piece on why everyone hates Americans, all the while remaining utterly unaware of his own healthy contribution to this phenomenon.

Ever since 9/11 Americans have been asking themselves why so many people around the world seem to hate them. But for the likes of

notion that anyone could conceivably have a legitimate grievance against the US or have a problem with the way it conducts its foreign policy. The only possible reasons he can see for dislike of the US are the envy and self-loathing of all those losers in the world who are just sick with jealousy that they have failed where the US has succeeded.

Let me reiterate: this is why people dislike Americans.

But let's get one thing straight. Most people are able to draw a dis-

calculated to offend and has nothing but disdain for world opinion.

It is the America that dismisses all criticism of America as the product of envy and self-loathing.

In short, what most people dislike is not Americans so much as it is the attitude that is embodied by a certain kind of American. And this certain kind of American has found a home for the past half century in the Republican party.

Now, this is not to say that all Republicans are rabidly anti-

reassuring, and, not coincidentally, America's stature in the world was never higher than during his presidency.

Under Clinton people felt that the US saw itself as a part of the world community. Under Clinton people felt that the US respected world opinion and that it could potentially use its massive power for the common good.

But the kind of American I am writing about wants nothing to do with what Krauthammer contemp-

Americans can or should do about it.

But that's not the only problem. The US is facing a huge problem of lack of support in the twin wars it is waging against al-Qaeda and in Iraq, and if it wants to win these wars then it needs as many people on its side as it can possibly muster. If it takes the attitude that people who are opposed to it are opposed to it through blind hatred then it will never make the adjustments necessary to win people over.

To win hearts and minds, the US must understand that many of the people who oppose it are not anti-American but merely anti-Republican, and that it would not be difficult at all to enlist their help. All that is necessary is little less hubris and a little more respect.

It must be nice to live in as simplistic a world as Krauthammer's. It must be nice to be able to determine that if no one likes you then it is their fault not yours. It must be nice to be so certain of your own rectitude and so contemptuous of others that you never have to question yourself or your own actions.

But the problem with this attitude is that it precludes the possibility of anything ever changing and is ultimately self-defeating. It isn't a particularly helpful or illuminating perspective to take if one is truly serious about addressing so-called anti-Americanism.

The search for logic in what he calls anti-Americanism is far from fruitless, and for Krauthammer it should be easier than most to locate. He can find it every morning looking back at him from his bathroom mirror.

Zafar Sobhan is an Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

It is important to make this distinction between anti-Americanism and anti-Republicanism... To win hearts and minds, the US must understand that many of the people who oppose it are not anti-American but merely anti-Republican, and that it would not be difficult at all to enlist their help. All that is necessary is little less hubris and a little more respect.

Krauthammer, the answer is simple:

"The fact is that the world hates the US for its wealth, its success, its power. They hate the US into incoherence. The search for logic in anti-Americanism is fruitless. It is in the air the world breathes. Its roots are envy and self-loathing -- by peoples who, yearning for modernity but having failed at it, find their one satisfaction in despising modernity's great exemplar."

That's it. That's his analysis. That's his considered judgment on the subject. I don't need to embellish a thing -- his words speak for itself. Krauthammer quite simply oozes arrogance and contempt for the rest of the world.

He dismisses out of hand the

distinction between Charles Krauthammer and all Americans. We realise that thankfully he doesn't represent the whole country. We realise that the US is filled with people of good conscience and generosity who do not share Krauthammer's smug certitude or intemperate xenophobia.

It's not really America that we dislike. It is a certain conception of America personified by the likes of Dennis Miller and Charles Krauthammer that we dislike.

The America that most people dislike is the America that is arrogant and xenophobic and says to hell with the rest of the world.

It is the America that conducts its foreign policy in a tone that seems

foreigner. But the party does pander to the electorate's basest instincts and just as it is home to the bigots and racists and homophobes so it has also opened its arms to the arrogant and intolerant xenophobic America-firsters who despise anything non-American and feel that the US should do as it pleases and not be constrained by opinion beyond its borders.

It is this kind of American that most people around the world have a problem with.

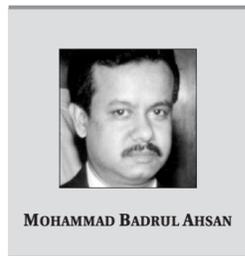
Most people have no grievance against the US as a country per se or Americans as people in general. Bill Clinton was hugely popular around the world because he embodied a face of the US that people found

tuously dismisses as "the Clinton administration's hyperapologetic, good citizen internationalism."

And it is this attitude -- not being American per se -- that people around the world don't like. It is the Republican mind-set that pours scorn on multilateralism and sensitivity to world opinion and takes comfort from the bullying and the bluster of the Bush administration.

It is important to make this distinction between anti-Americanism and anti-Republicanism. If the sole problem the US faced in the world today were the anti-Americanism of those who are filled with envy and self-loathing, as Krauthammer imagines, then he would be correct in his belief that there isn't much

Red in the face



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NAME one thing, which is not a diet but consumed by one person, it nourishes many. One man earns to feed many mouths, yet regular income has the austere discipline of a monk. But bribe has the wanton abundance of a promiscuous woman. It is the cut above the income, the margin, which is greater than its basis. Cut your coat according to your whims. There is no shortage of cloth. If one person takes bribe, it's given to many.

The dictionary meaning of the word bribe is money or other valuable consideration given or promised with a view to corrupting the behaviour of a person. So, bribe is basically the asking price of a person's character, the cost of having to compromise his conscience. The question is whether a lower-priced thing is less corrupting than a higher-priced thing. How big does the drop of urine need to be to spoil a pale of milk?

Many years ago, a professor of law at the University of California, Berkeley wrote a book named *Bribes* published by Macmillan. John T. Noonan Jr. defined in his book that "A bribe is an inducement improv-

erly influencing the performance of a public function meant to be gratuitously exercised." He applied the word bribe to figures as distinguished as Francis Bacon and Thomas Becket, and to a whole array of US Presidents: Monroe, Garfield, Johnson, and Nixon.

At the dawn of human society, the offering of gifts for reciprocal services was a common sign of good intentions. A roving tribesman offered some bright stone to a

ing".

It was in the last sense that the word first appeared in English in the fourteenth century, in the works of Chaucer and his contemporaries. It soon evolved further and the term briber meant a person, who did menacing to get money. In the sixteenth century the meaning flipped completely over. The word briber came to mean a person handing over the money.

Which led King James I to call his

betrayal of the public trust necessary for society's survival. Perhaps bribery is as old as human instinct, and one of the dangers in making ethical judgements is that the standards keep changing. After all, slavery was once considered morally acceptable and usury was once considered morally reprehensible.

Yet, bribe is condemned in all societies as a corrupting gift. It's looked down upon as ransom for a captive favour, an extortion by the

forbidden thing like blasphemy or sodomy? Why have the authors of the American Constitution specified in Article II that the President and "all civil officers" of the U.S. could be impeached for "treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors"? Why did William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, sternly say, "The taking of bribe or gratuity, should be punished with as severe penalties as the defrauding of the State"?

turns man into merchandise, passion into product and conscience into a confectionery. Bribe turns morality into a marketplace where all things are bought and sold. Bribe is bordello of human characters, one of the sordid pillars of corruption, which spawns human miseries.

Lately, a meter-reader was in the news for giving away a hefty sum of money in donation. He has surprised us because his means couldn't justify what he did. It struck us as odd that a man of meagre income could part with so much money. But then his profession has made it obvious, and we all know how he earned it.

In 1939, English writer Edmund Clerihew Bentley quipped in *Baseless Biography* that when the lordships in the parliament asked Bacon how many bribes he had taken, he had at least the grace to get very red in the face. If the meter-reader has earned so much money, now he has also given some of it in donation. Now that he has given this donation, he is going to get something out of it. And that something perhaps will be a deal to make more money or become more powerful. It's the daisy's chain of success, opportunity growing on opportunity.

Here is one more thing about bribe, which has changed over time. It's not the meter-reader who will get red in the face. He is now big in charity. But the rest of us never made enough to give so much. It is for us to get very red in the face.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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stranger simply to show that he meant no violence. The early judges could accept gifts from both sides and still rule justly. Bribing was as innocuous materially as it was spiritually. Sacrifices were offered to divine forces for rain and wind.

Dutch archaeologists had found an administrative centre of the ancient Assyrian empire, 3,400 years old, in which an archive listed the names of "employees accepting bribes". In medieval French bribe meant "a piece of bread". A linguistic game of consequences led it from one sense to another. Gradually, it turned into "a piece of bread given to a beggar", then by further steps the meaning arrived at "theft" or "steal-

citizens to make public accusation if they knew of bribery of his judges. Amongst the first to complain was John Wrenham who charged in 1617 that the learned Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon had accepted bribe and unfairly ruled against him. But when Wrenham failed to prove anything, both his ears were cut off and he was "perpetually imprisoned". Four years later Bacon finally confessed to a whole array of bribes, and Parliament fined him £ 40,000 and sentenced him to the Tower. The King majestically commuted the penalties.

Noonan argued that morality had little relevance to corruption and concluded that bribery was a

abuse of one's office or authority. It's so much a gift as rape is sex, intimidation is persuasion, and force is freedom. Bribe is basically human decency boiled down to the negotiation table. It puts a price tag on the soul of a man and takes away his dignity.

So, what is wrong with bribery except for the fact that it gives one the reputation that one can be bought for money? Let us say that bribe is a premium one attaches to what one gets paid to do anyway. What is wrong with it, if not for the absurdity of asking for a gift under coercion? Bribe has the ludicrous acerbity of asking for baksheesh at gunpoint.

Is bribe bad then, some kind of a

It's because bribery is obscene, a moral aberration that is comparable to prostitution. It's because bribery puts the duty of a man on auction, because he is ready to sell his virtue for a price, his soul engaged in the immoral trafficking of its own modesty. "God does not take shohadh" proclaims the book of Deuteronomy, shohadh being the Hebrew word for bribe. Man, who is made in the image of God, must also live in the image of God. He violates his own sanctity by accepting bribe, embarrassing his creator in the sanctuary of His own creation.

Bribe creates bad blood because it's cutthroat gift, because it's an antithesis to fellow feeling. Bribe

OPINION

Are we violating our own Constitution?

SHAMIMA ISLAM

WE are not in any declared 'emergency', when 'suspension of enforcement of fundamental human rights can be done for the period during which Proclamation is in force' (Article 141C(1)) ... 'when the State can make any law or take any executive action, and any law so made shall ... cease to have effect as soon as the Proclamation ceases to operate' (Article 141B).

Needless to say, we are proud to have a unique Constitution of the country which proclaims that fundamental aim of the state is to 'realise through the democratic process... a society in which rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social will be secured for all citizens' (PREAMBLE, adopted and enacted in the Constituent Assembly on 4th November, 1972).

Although the Fundamental Principles of State Policy boldly pro-

claims (Article 11) that 'fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed', in recent years we observe more and more curtailment of fundamental human rights and freedom due to enactment of Rules by varied agencies.

For example, the Traffic Rules in Dhaka Metropolitan City may be cited as a case in point. It demands serious concern as it matters the common mass. The recent movement to eliminate rickshaws gradually from the Dhaka city needs serious consideration. The new rules are in operation in selected areas and its enforcement will be extended in many more areas, which ultimately will engulf almost the entire city to give a very orderly look.

Do we realise that the vast majority of the people because of their limitations in economic resources ride rickshaws? Then who are we to

curb their freedom of choice for transport through promulgation of rules, which compel them to undergo sufferings -- economically, physically and socially? The recent traffic rules applicable in the metropolitan areas hurt people's dignity as human being. It discriminates between classes as it allows the limited minority who can afford to ride cars and CNG transport and can move through any city roads and reach their desired destinations and the vast majority of rickshaw riders who are restricted in their movement and are barred from entering roads and selected areas of the Dhaka city merely because they ride rickshaws due to their small economic capacity. The whole approach is extremely negative to the very basic principles of democracy and human rights.

Let us consider another side of the rules, which can also be interpreted indirectly. Somebody having access

to motor vehicles, can ply through all the city roads and all the city areas both commercial and residential, even if the person becomes the most wanted criminal, a highly corrupt person, a big loan defaulter and even being a foreigner whereas the most innocent law-abiding, honest citizen, only because of his/her limited economic means is barred to have free access to the city areas merely because the person rides a rickshaw.

The rickshaw passenger is *not allowed* with the transport to reach his/her desired destination, if the person is not willing to spend more money for other transport or is not ready to walk all the way upto the destination.

Needless to say, we thus discriminate through varieties of our actions and policies and the sufferings of the silent majority grow manifold. They are helpless in the situation!

The Fundamental Rights of the Constitution (Part III) proclaims

'equality before Law' and let me ask: what form of equality do we pursue when it matters Traffic Rules and Municipal Regulations adopted and implemented in our Dhaka city?

Let me put another proposal as a corollary to the 'rickshaw elimination' rules that some major roads and areas be selected as 'car free zone', which needs to be adopted by both the Traffic Department and the Municipality. For promotion of equality pronounced in our sacred Constitution, it will be a very desired action. It will not only bring equality but also improve quality of environment in the selected areas.

We all know that we have tremendous 'traffic jams' in the Dhaka city and following our recent rules rickshaws will be eliminated in the long-term perspective. But let me ask: is the jam created because of existence of rickshaws or because of our varied inefficiencies to handle the traffic? The corrupt practices in the whole

system also increase the hassle and people's sufferings. The daily traffic jams that one observes in many 'rickshaw free zones' like elite Gulshan and many other selected areas where vehicles are stranded for long time, distinctly proves that the assumption that 'rickshaws create jam' is *absolutely absurd*. It is *not rickshaws but it is our mismanagement*! Banning rickshaws on city roads for jam sounds ridiculous like another simple decision if we take that 'let us ban lakhs of candidates to sit for SSC examination because we cannot control cheating.'

Again let us not forget the case of migrant, poor vast number of rickshaw-pullers who ply on the city roads to earn a living and thus they with their families survive. They are in 'below-poverty level trap' who migrate to cities for bare survival and it is needless to say, they are illiterate. Access to rickshaws gives them some opportunity to survive. Now let me

ask a simple question again: who are we to rob them of the opportunity to honest earnings through hard toil merely by pronouncing certain rules without making alternative arrangements for their earnings? Can we deprive these lawful citizens of the country to earn a living by plying rickshaws in city streets merely because we have permitted our affluent few to increase the number of cars and we fail to control and promote orderly movement of city traffic because of our own inefficiency? We all know that 'poverty traps' create and enhance many problems and issues but let us not forget that 'work is a right, a duty and a matter of honour for every citizen' (Article 20(1)) and 'every citizen shall have the right to enter any lawful occupation' (Article 40). Let us not make distinction between rickshaw drivers and car drivers, between rickshaw passengers and car riders. If we do so, it will tantamount to

inequality in many forms, which will be gross violation of our Constitution, which boldly pronounces, 'the State shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens' (Article 19(1)).

Let us not discriminate among classes. Let us all remember that 'it shall be a fundamental responsibility of the State to emancipate the toiling masses -- the peasants and workers and backward sections of the people from all forms of exploitation' (Article 14).

Let us help the disadvantaged people to earn resources, skill and new knowledge. Simultaneously, let both the decision makers and implementers improve their own efficiency for better management. Let us all remember that, 'our sacred duty is to safeguard, protect and defend the constitution and to maintain its supremacy' (PREAMBLE).

Shamima Islam is a social researcher and activist.