LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY FEBRUARY 10, 2006

A day of sad remembrance

So much to learn from it

HIS was martyrdom without a parallel. The 10th of Muharram reminds us of the saga of tragic selfsacrifice enacted in defense of truth and justice arrayed against the forces of tyranny and deceit.

Imam Hossain (RA), the beloved grandson of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) was viciously trapped, with his near and dear ones at Karbala on the bank of the river Forat, denied water and food and done to death by Yazid, the pretender to power.

The moral of the tragedy is threefold: first, it must be seen as a supreme example of an uncompromising stance taken not by the sword, but with the sheer will of the mind, against usurpation of state power by the vilest of means conceivable. The martyrs, by keeping to the dictates of Islam requiring its adherents not to capitulate before what is wrong and unjust but to fight all that, till their last breath, took the spiritual experience of sacrifice to an exemplary height. Secondly, the episode established the noble principle of faith under attack being more valuable than life. Thirdly, Yazid might have emerged as a mundane winner but the glory of the day belonged to those who died for a cause, triumphant as a moral victor.

The messages to be drawn from the tragedy of Karbala are timeless and, in that sense, the latter has an universality of appeal amongst the forces of good, righteousness and rationality. What we see today is using the name of religion for expedient purposes and, even worse, topping it off with violence. Ashura takes us to the glory of true Islam.

In some parts of the Islamic world we see sectarianism raising its head with the Shi'a-Sunni divide yawning and breeding tension in societies. To our great pride, Bangladesh has traditionally been an abode of communal harmony. It is only lately that a reactionary and orthodox group of people has launched a campaign against the Ahmaddiyas. For the love and respect of Islam, such an expression of intolerance in a fit of persecution mentality must be done away with.

Waste management in deep soup

Useful BBS-UNDP survey

O say the least, environment pollution is in a deplorable state. There is hardly any regular system of monitoring and control in place. Matters are only aggravated through lack of awareness of the various aspects of environmental pollution. At a time when environment has emerged as one of the most dominant concerns the world over, we have certainly fallen behind in realising the importance of it all. At least, our deeds proves the point.

The pollution in the industrial sector is caused by multiple factors. There is hardly any industry in the country that has a firm waste management policy, to say nothing of one that is backed by any allocated budget. Recycling of waste material is virtually non-existent. Problems are further aggravated by the haphazard growth and operation of industrial units in and around the city. The way effluents from tanneries are threatening the lives of people is but too well known. Another leading polluter is the readymade garment factory, particularly its washing plants that are gurgling effluent into the nearby water

The pollution caused by garment factories, though not readily visible, partly due to their not being confined to any marked industrial zone but their negative impact on the surrounding localities is guite extensive. Of concern is also the waste disposal by hospitals and clinics, which are not only threatening our environment but also posing a direct threat to the lives of city dwellers. On the other hand, gas emissions from motor vehicles and their hydraulic horns continue to be yet another major polluter. Although the arrival of the CNG-operated three wheelers improved the situation to some extent, the continued presence of the decades-old, diesel-operated buses and minibuses continue to be a major source of air pollution.

In the not-too-distant future, Dhaka will be one of the biggest mega-cities of the world. It is high time we gave our utmost attention to the current state of city environment. The government must act here and now and deal with the issue both at the policy level and, more importantly, through monitoring and enforcement of law

Unabated environmental degradation has far-reaching effects on both the physical and mental health of the people and by implication on the future of the country.

Prof Yunus steps up



HAKA is still buzzing over the keynote speech Prof Yunus gave on February 4 at The Daily Star's 15th anniversary

Speeches at functions like these tend to be fairly prosaic, and one does not expect to be inspired and uplifted, so no one was really expecting Prof Yunus to electrify the audience with a barn-burner of an

But that is precisely what the 2000 plus who were present were treated to, and apart from adding excitement to the event, the speech set forth an inspiring blueprint for how the long-suffering people of this country can retake control of our political destiny

Prof Yunus's speech was equal parts visionary political philosophy and equal parts a call to arms to the citizens of the country to take back the democratic process.

It was the kind of speech that renewed your hope in the political process and made you think that the resolution of our political problems in this country, and by extension all the other troubles that we are faced with, is within our grasp as a nation.

Let us strike while the iron is hot. While the excitement is still in the air. it should be possible for concerned and committed citizens to get STRAIGHT TALK

lunderstand the Prof Yunus has the Grameen Bank to run. Has he not, he might reasonably ask, done more than enough for the country, that he must now be asked to take a lead role in ensuring the legitimacy of the upcoming elections? But for all of us those in the country who have long bemoaned the calibre of our elected leaders and hoped that the more members of civil society would step up their engagement with the political process, the involvement of the likes of Prof Yunus would be encouraging.

together to make the most immediate item on the political agenda -free and fair elections in which the electorate is provided with a meanngful choice -- a reality.

The issue of free and fair elections is something that a large cross-section of citizens' groups have been working to ensure for some time now. However, the work of these organizations and movements has so far failed to gain much traction with the public.

But the endorsement of Bangladesh's most celebrated figure is bound to give the disparate movements a shot in the arm and provide them with a focal point for concentrating the public's attention.

Now, the issue of good elections encompasses a number of vari-The first of these is who is on the

ballot. The principal suggestion made by Prof Yunus had to do with public mobilization and empowerment to ensure that the political parties run decent candidates for office and not party insiders or corrupt elements

The second issue is how to ensure that the elections are free and fair. Prof Yunus didn't address this issue directly in his speech, but if the kind of public mobilization that he outlined becomes a reality, then a credible and legitimate election

becomes the logical consequence. Good elections really only require three things: the first is that the voter roll be acceptable, the second is that people are able to vote without threat or intimidation, and the third is that the count must be open and

transparent. All of the above are readily achievable if the public is sufficiently mobilized and motivated to ensure that they occur.

Think back to the elections of 1991. Emerging from a decade of autocratic rule, the Bangladeshi people were united in their desire for good elections and to participate fully in the democratic process.

It wouldn't have been possible to steal those elections, as everyone felt that they had a stake in the process, and the citizenry were united in their determination that nothing should stand in the way of good elections.

There is no reason why we should not be able to recreate that national mood for the upcoming

If there is mass mobilization of the public at each polling station and the vote counting is done in an open and transparent manner, then it becomes impossible for any one side to steal the election.

Thus, Prof Yunus's suggestion of mobilization and empowerment of the general public as the means to move beyond our current moribund political reality is right on the money.

The question is now that there is momentum and buzz building behind these movements, how do we capitalize on them?

It seems to me that the election issue can be split into two component parts:

The first one is the issue of people's participation and ensuring good candidates. What is now needed is for citizens' groups to organize themselves on a constituency-based level and work with the local party leaders to ensure that the voters' demands are addressed.

The beauty of this approach is that it does not require legislation to be passed or the actions of judges or the police to be enforced.

With the media and local groups working together in each constituency, there is no reason why this movement cannot gain traction. The fact that Prof Yunus has put his imprimatur behind it should certainly

One thing which other members of civil society could do would be to endorse this idea and work to spread it through the country. Pressure can then be placed on the political parties to fall in line or face a

There are many disparate groups in the country, working on different aspects of ensuring good elections.



and what is actually needed is for these forces to have one focal point.

Perhaps it is not what he had in mind, but I would suggest that these groups could do nothing better than to try to draft Prof Yunus himself to head up this effort. No good deed goes unpunished. Perhaps the price Prof Yunus will have to pay for coming up with this idea is to be at the forefront of its implementation.

I think that Prof Yunus's own personal leadership is precisely what the effort needs. The movement requires someone of his stature, ability, and integrity to succeed

Likewise, Prof Yunus himself would be a prime candidate for the "Respected Person" he suggested in his speech to act as mediator between the BNP and the AL to try to move beyond the present political impasse with regard to the opposition's reform proposals

I am sure he did not have himself in mind when he made the suggestion, but who can deny that he would be one of the names on a very short list who would be suitable for the job.

I understand the Prof Yunus has the Grameen Bank to run. Has he not, he might reasonably ask, done more than enough for the country, that he must now be asked to take a lead role in ensuring the legitimacy of the upcoming elections?

But for all of us those in the country who have long bemoaned the calibre of our elected leaders and hoped that the more respected members of civil society would step up their engagement with the political process, the involvement of the likes of Prof Yunus would be

extremely encouraging. Prof Yunus has undoubtedly been wise not to have ever joined or been too closely identified with any political party. The political climate in Bangladesh is so polarized that doing so would have run the risk of getting in the way of the smooth functioning of Grameen Bank, which has done so much good for so

But non-partisan political engagement is another issue. By stepping squarely into the debate on elections, Prof Yunus has signaled that even though he will not take sides, he might be willing to play a lead role in ensuring the continued viability of the democratic process. Let us hope that he is and that he

is not the only one. Civil society must be willing to expend its time and effort on a non-partisan basis to ensure that the upcoming elections are free and fair and offer the people a meaningful choice.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

From dogfight to divinity



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

AST week I met my hero who looked aloof from his heroic deed. He smiled and said that once he was a hero of "some sort." but now he was no more than a servant of God. In an interview on PTV in 1994 he referred to himself as "another man from an erstwhile time." He seems to know that those who dwell in the past are condemned to repeat it. He doesn't want to be a hero in a dogfight. He wants to fight for God.

Forty years later my hero is past his prime. He can easily pass on the street for an ordinary mosque-going believer, old and diminutive, his face plastered with grey and black beard, his head covered with traditional white Muslim cap. But his face and eyes would make you wonder how the ravages of age failed to spoil the iridescent glow of a magnificent

In his own words, he was still very hardy and healthy, all his vital signs looking normal except for the wheezing sound in his chest that comes and goes like a silent storm. He smokes two packs a day, the cigarette held between his index and middle finger, flipped from time to time to form a straight line with the swollen blue vein running like a groundswell in the middle of his pistachio-coloured hand, twitching to flick ash.

He spoke with eloquence, mostly in English, going back and forth in time, resenting that the Muslim

CROSS TALK

He was born in West Bengal in 1935 and his family settled in East Bengal after the partition. He studied in Narinda Government High School in Dhaka and then joined the Pakistan Air Force. He shot down 11 Indian fighter planes during the 1965 war, five of them in 30-40 seconds, a heroic feat that remains unmatched in the history of aerial warfare in the world.

intellectuals had abandoned the path of Islam in the temptation of western values. He talked about how he fought with the Mujahidin in Afghanistan to drive out the Russians. Then he argued that Muslims had miserably failed to grow in military power, which is why the Jihadi is left with no choice but to wear the strap to blow up himself as a "rational response to an irrational world." My hero looked more heroic when he said that Islam would rise again, this time from South Asia, His dream is to see one country stretching from Afghanistan to Teknaf.

Norman Mailer writes in The Presidential Papers that ultimately a hero is a man who would argue with the Gods, and so awaken devils to contest his vision. My hero reconciled with God at the age of thirty when his father died, but made many enemies as he tried to argue in favour of religion. He used to drink heavily and gave it up a few months. before he went to war. Then he started a campaign to ban drinking in the Air Force, which set him on a collision course with many of his

He was disappointed to see the disintegration of Pakistan in 1971. He was disgusted with the Puniabi elite which refused to hand over power to the Bengalis. For a while, he wasn't allowed to fly due to his Bengali background. He would face even more resistance in the latter days for his vocal stance.

He was an Air Commodore, when he confronted his Air Chief, some say over the injustice done to his friend Sekander Mahmud, some say over some corruption in the Air Force. In 1982, he was slammed with forced retirement, and my hero uttered "Allahu Akbar" in response. He had lived his useful time in the Air Force, and God wished him to move

He said that justice is critical for any society and Pakistan disintegrated for lack of it. Jinnah's arrogance to make Urdu the state language of Pakistan was the begin ning and then the plundering of East Pakistan to develop West Pakistan was atrocious. He personally witnessed how funds were siphoned off from the Ganges-Kobadak project in East Pakistan to build the splendours of Islamabad. Zulfikhar Ali Bhutto was intellectually corrupt, which eventually brought his down-

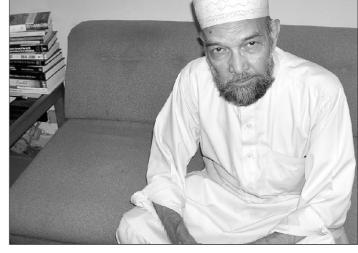
He claimed that he was still a Bengali at heart. I asked him how he could expect anyone to believe him since he had opted for Pakistan after 1971 and couldn't even speak the language. He looked unfazed as he readily replied that he didn't have to justify it to anyone because he knew he is a Bengali in his heart.

Air Vice-Marshall (Retd.) Azim Daudpota, former Chairman of PIA and former Governor of Sindh, said that "Peanut" (a sobriquet my hero had earned in the Pakistan Air Force for his small stature) was indeed a Bengali at heart because he was depressed for several months after 1971. He was training the Syrian pilots in those days and refused to take his salary for those months because he didn't go to work. "Peanut" had a strict sense of ethics. said Mr. Daudpota, who recalled that some of the Air Force officers had submitted excessive personal claims from the Syrian government and "Peanut" had them courtmartialed.

My hero is under ISI surveillance, because he brutally criticizes the leaders of Pakistan. He is worried that Pakistan is going to become weak and slip under the Indian hegemony. He regularly follows the events in Bangladesh, and would like to request the two leaders to sit down and have dialogues between them. He believes Sheikh Hasina would return to power for a historic reason. There must be strategic alliance between Bangladesh and

He never got married since it fell on him to raise five brothers and six sisters after the death of his father. the last of the sisters being married off in 1982. He feels lonely at times as old age takes its toll on him, buried in his books and the heavy silence of Flat 201 in Falcon II Air Force mess on Shar-e-Faisal in Karachi. He would like to remind you that more than love and sex. marriage is a functional necessity of life.

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1965 war, five of them in 30-40 seconds, a heroic feat that remains unmatched in the history of aerial warfare in the world. According to Mr. Azim Daudpota, this heroic act smashed the backbone of the Indian Air Force in favour of Pakistan, In-Sargoda, when Ayub Khan was introduced to the hero who had saved Pakistan, Mr. Daudpota vouched that he saw tears in the eves of the President.

I asked my hero what went through his mind when he was shooting down those planes. He looked at me and lowered his head to show how he bowed before Allah sitting in his cockpit. He was merely an instrument in the hands his Maker who put him to use for a worthy cause. He claims to have established connection with the other world and it opens before him like a three-dimensional TV in his meditation.

M M Alam is the name of my hero for those who might still remember him. He is a national hero in Pakistan and there is a road named after

Indian fighter planes during the him in Lahore. He is a legend to the young Air Force officers in Pakistan and a household name. Children read about him in the textbooks. I asked him how it felt to be a living legend and what should children learn from his example. He said they must never give up hope and always take the path of Islam.

> Tolstoy wrote in Sevastopol in May that the hero of his tale -- whom he loved with all the power of his soul, who he has tried to portray in all his beauty, who has been, is, and will be beautiful -- is Truth. M M Alam never invested his heroic act in earthly gains such as political office. license, permit, publicity, women, houses, and cash. He never claimed the house given him by the **Dhaka Municipal Corporation after** the 1965 war. He has chosen to live a life invested in truth

His heroic life started after he had become a hero

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

A mountain out of a molehill over Danish cartoons

Of all the issues that plague the Muslim world today, are our priorities cartoons published in a newspaper in a country inhabited by less than 6 million people? If we really want to pick a fight with the West, have we forgotten that 500 Muslim men continue to be detained without charge at the makeshift prison run by

the United States at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which last week marked its fourth anniversary?

MONA ELTAHAWY

AN we finally admit that Muslims have blown out of all proportion their outrage over 12 cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad published in a Danish newspaper last September?

In the latest twist, both the Organization for the Islamic Conference and the Gulf Cooperation Council condemned a Norwegian newspaper for reprinting the drawings -- a decision the publication defended as protecting freedom of expression. Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador from Denmark for "consultations" and Iragis called in sermons and demonstrations for an investigation into the Danish and Norwegian publications that published the cartoons.

The initial printing of the cartoons in Denmark led to death threats being issued against the artists, demonstrations in Kashmir, and condemnation from 11 countries. What did any of this achieve but prove the original point of the newspaper's culture editor, that artists in Europe were censoring themselves because they feared Muslim reaction? He commissioned the cartoons after hearing that Danish artists were too scared to illustrate a children's book about the prophet.

While one cartoon was particularly offensive because it showed the prophet as wearing a turban with a bomb attached to it, a great deal of the anger had to do with the mere depiction of the prophet. Muslims

seem to forget that just because they are prohibited from representing the prophet in any way, this does not apply to everybody else. Even with regards to the egregious cartoon showing the prophet with a bomb, Muslim reaction was exaggerated. This should have remained an internal Danish issue. Muslim groups in Denmark have been pursuing a legal course and have vowed to appeal a prosecutor's refusal to file charges against the newspaper.

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen was right not to intervene, insisting the government has no say over media -- the argument used by Arab leaders when they are asked about anti-Semitism in their media, by the way. But in a New Year's speech, Rasmussen condemned "any expression, action or indication that attempts to demonize groups of people on the basis of their religion or ethnic background.' What should have remained a

local issue turned into a diplomatic uproar that Muslims otherwise rarely provoke when fighting for their rights around the world. Perhaps the Muslim governments who spearheaded the campaign -- led by Egypt -- felt this was an easy way to burnish their Islamic credentials at a time when domestic Islamists are stronger than they have been in many years.

Must we really boycott Danish products, as one e-mail I received exhorted? And why did an audience

member at December's Arab Thought Foundation conference in Dubai insist on delivering a lecture on the Danish cartoons, instead of focusing on the topic of the panel namely Arab media and terrorism?

Of all the issues that plague the Muslim world today, are our priorities cartoons published in a newspaper in a country inhabited by less than 6 million people? If we really want to pick a fight with the West, have we forgotten that 500 Muslim men continue to be detained without charge at the makeshift prison run by the United States at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which last week marked its fourth anniver-

The fracas over the cartoons is a sad testament to the impotence of the Muslim world. That clerics and leaders of Muslim countries gain any sense of power over this issue is a reminder of how powerless they really are and also a reminder, as if we needed one, of the moral bankruptcy of our self-appointed moral guides. It is no wonder that these same moral guides have gone on a power trip over cartoons after all, clerics in Egypt have been arguing over whether married couples can be naked during sex.

In the midst of they hysteria over the cartoons, here are a few facts we should remember. However offensive any of the 12 cartoons were, they did not incite violence against Muslims. For an example of incitement, though, one must go back a few weeks before the cartoons were published. In August, the Danish authorities withdrew for three months the broadcasting license of a Copenhagen radio station after it called for the extermination of Muslims. Those were real threats and the government protected Muslims -- the same government later condemned for not punishing the newspaper that published the cartoons

Second, the cartoon incident belongs at the very centre of the kind of debate that Muslims must have in the European countries where they live -- particularly after the Madrid train bombings of 2003 and the London subway bombings of 2005. While right-wing antiimmigration groups whip up Islamophobia in Denmark, Muslim communities wallow in denial over the increasing role of their own extremists.

As just one example, last August Fadi Abdullatif, the spokesman for the Danish branch of the militant Hizb-ut-Tahrir organization, was charged with calling for the killing of members of the Danish government. He distributed leaflets calling on Muslims in Denmark to go to Fallujah in Iraq and fight the Americans, and to kill their own leaders if they obstructed them. Police in Denmark have been on alert since the London bombings, after which at least three extremist Web sites warned that Denmark could be the next target. There are 500 Danish troops working alongside American and British troops in Iraq.

Not only does Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an organization banned in many Muslim countries, have a branch in Denmark, but Abdullatif has a history of calling for violence that he then justifies by referring to freedom of speech -- the very notion the Danish newspaper made use of to publish the cartoons. In October 2002. Abdullatif was found quilty of distributing racist propaganda after Hizb-ut-Tahrir handed out leaflets that made threats against Jews by citing verses from the Koran. He was given a 60-day suspended sentence.

Abdullatif used the Koran to justify incitement to violence! And we still wonder why people associate Islam with violence?

Muslims must honestly examine why there is such a huge gap between the way we imagine Islam and our prophet, and the way both are seen by others. Our offended sensibilities must not be limited to the Danish newspaper or the cartoonist, but to those like Fadi Abdullatif whose actions should be regarded as just as offensive to Islam and to our reverence for the prophet. Otherwise, we are all responsible for those Danish car-

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