

Caught in the device of his own words

Can Nizami backtrack?

THERE is no delicate way to put it. When Jamaat-Islami Ameer and Industries Minister Motiur Rahman Nizami states that he never suggested that Bangla Bhai was a creation of the media, he is being untruthful. It is understandable that he would wish to distance himself from his earlier statements on the matter -- which were also untruthful -- but in doing so, he has compounded his earlier mendacity and lost credibility.

The record clearly shows that as far back as in April and May, 2004, the two months marked by mayhem and murder committed by militants under the leadership of Bangla Bhai in the areas of Rajshahi and Naogaon, Nizami went on a tirade against the media, saying that there was no one by the name of Bangla Bhai and that he was a creation of the media. This calumny was repeated by him many times.

Does the good minister want exact dates of these falsehoods? Very well. June 22, 2004: "Police have nothing to do when there is no existence of so-called Bangla Bhai." Or how about July 22, 2004: "Bangla Bhai was created by some newspapers." There is more, we could go on.

Indeed, his current position that he only complained of the amount of space the media had given to Bangla Bhai does not portray him in any better light, even if one were to accept it at face value. For he basically adds to, and not subtract from, his original innuendo that Bangla Bhai was a creation of the media.

What the newspapers were faithfully doing was to expose the truths about armed terrorism being carried out by Bangla Bhai and his associates, thereby helping to create public opinion against militancy which has worked so well in the capture of the most wanted militant.

The Jamaat Ameer's words then and now lead us to two inescapable conclusions. The first is that his undisguised grudge against the media highlighting Bangla Bhai's reign of torture and brutalisation betrayed a certain concern on his part that he would have preferred the truth to remain hidden. The second, and corollary, deduction that the reason he was so upset by the truth being brought to light was because of the allegations of Jamaati connection to JMB.

The confessional statements and background of captured JMB cadres have pointed to a link with the Jamaat and this is what the government needs to get to the bottom of, together with finger-pointing at some ministers' role in the BNP-led cabinet.

Panic deaths again!

Who will answer for these?

THE death of three garment workers in a stampede, following a fire panic at a factory in Gazipur on Monday, does prove that worker safety concerns remain as neglected as before. The recent fire and building collapse deaths, which caused quite a furore, have made no difference in the situation whatsoever.

Let's have a look at the circumstances in which the three women workers perished. The fire alarm was reportedly triggered by an electric bulb burst, and the factory supervisors set off the emergency siren which created great panic among the 2,000 people working on the 7th floor of the factory building. The staircase of the building was narrow and, as a result, the stampede became unavoidable. Many an owner has done little or nothing to ensure safety of the garment workers, most of whom are women.

They are known to be playing a pivotal role in keeping the national economy buoyant. But who cares?

The question of paying compensation to the victims is relevant, though it can by no means alter the fact that the workers' lives were being subjected to criminal neglect which itself must not escape appropriate punitive action. We believe compensation is paid according to archaic laws. There are many loopholes in them as daily wage earners and those working on contract basis are placed in a different category. But human lives are human lives and we firmly support the idea of making no discrimination when it comes to compensating the families of the victims.

This stampede incident has made it clear that the workers remain in a constant state of anxiety and fear lest something untoward happened so that a minor sign of danger could send them rushing through the narrow staircase, the only exit point in most of the factories. Something concrete must be done to restore confidence in them.

Is it the end of the road for the radicals?



THE country must have heaved a sigh of relief when the two most wanted men in the country, with the blood of many innocent Bangladeshis on their hands, were captured in quick succession of one another. What was most satisfying was that they were both captured alive with very little resistance faced by the law enforcement agencies. Although one felt that their capture was only a matter of time once the second and third string operatives of their organisations were captured several months ago, the cynics cannot keep from asking why it took so long to net them.

Again, at the risk of sounding cynical, it is also interesting to note the State Minister for Home eating his words by acknowledging the fact that Siddiqui Islam is neither an amorphous substance nor a phantom created by the media. In fact, it would surprise very few if it came to be officially confirmed, if any confirmation is at all required, that he was the product and beneficiary of some within the ruling coalition. His rise to a level strong

This is where the question of taking hard decisions by the government comes in. Whereas all this time it had displayed an ostrich like attitude by refusing to accept the reality, is it prepared to act against those within the alliance whose links to the radicals may come to be firmly established as a result of the arrest of the kingpins? And although not all madrasas can be painted with a broad brush of accusation of imparting radical ideas that are not only un-Islamic but also anti-Islam, there are certainly some that do so. Is the government willing to identify and take appropriate action against those?

enough to threaten the structure of the state, the history of growth of the two radical groups, and of course the record of his activities leaves us with no other conclusion but that the country had to suffer for the acts of some dim-witted party apparatchiks, motivated entirely by narrow personal considerations, as well as for the administration's unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility that such radical elements did indeed exist in Bangladesh.

It is even more gratifying to note that these two most wanted criminals were captured alive. There is no doubt that the agencies will be able to extract enough from them to get to the bottom of all the bomb blasts that were carried out in the country since 1999. There are reasons to believe that except for two incidents, that of August 21, 2004, and the killing of Mr. Kibria on January 25, 2005, all were carried out by the so-called Islamists group led by these two. It must be emphasised that the former was entirely political, designed to take out the entire Awami League leadership, while

Mr. Kibria's killing had to do with the national and regional political power play.

Their arrests, apart from belying the government's denial syndrome, has demonstrated that the law enforcement and intelligence agencies, whose performance deserves the ungrudging applause of all, although their Sylhet operations were rather callow, are capable of delivering the goods if left free from political interference and uncalculated control by their political masters. However, one cannot but regret the fact that, had the administration taken heed of all the reports that were published in the press regarding the activities of the radicals, particularly over the last three years, and there was a very definite record of Siddiqui Islam's evil activities, and not called into question the objectivity of the media, we might have been spared much of the agony and the turmoil, let alone be dubbed by our detractors as another Taliban-state in the making.

Their arrests will, one hopes, reveal the network of the organisations within the country as well as the internal and international links and support that they were pro-

vided, particularly the means and method of their funding. It is also very important that their local sponsors, and one couldn't be surer that there are a few, are also identified and brought to justice.

The million dollar question now is, have we seen the end of the radical activities in Bangladesh with the arrests of the two kingpins? At least the prime minister seems to be in no doubt that "any sort of extremism, or movement will die down and the terrorism in the name of Islam will end once for all" following the arrests. She is not alone in holding out such optimism. The minister for local government not many months ago demonstrated his ability to predict the future when he prophesied that the country would see the end of terrorism in the next two months.

One would like to share their optimism, but cannot, not because one doesn't want such activities in the country to end, but because of the simplistic way the whole phenomenon is perceived by many in the government. Thus, one cannot help but feel that the prime minister's comments, however well intentioned they might be, are not

only highly optimistic, they are premature in the current context, unless of course the government gets to the bottom of the issue. And that is not only time consuming, it requires political will to take some hard decisions by the government that may not be palatable to some of its coalition partners.

It would be risky to proceed on the premise that we have seen the end of the religious radicalism and terrorism and violence that are motivated by these views. Unless one can unearth the internal links of these groups, their local and international sponsors, and the extent of their tentacles at the grass roots level, to articulate such an optimistic scenario may catch us off guard.

The government must give serious thought to the fact these radical elements graduated from exploding harmless incendiary devices in all but one of the 64 upazillas near simultaneously, to engaging in suicide missions, all in a matter of three months. Where producing persons motivated to engage in such missions takes years, the suicide missions indicate the depth of the organisation, which must be addressed if we are to see that such groups do not reappear in our midst.

It will also do well for us to remember that there is a group of motivated persons, who, irrespective of their numbers, are willing to go to the full extent to establish their views, however much convoluted those might appear to us. These are the people who might have decided to lie low till the spate of arrests is over before they reappear, after regrouping and reform-

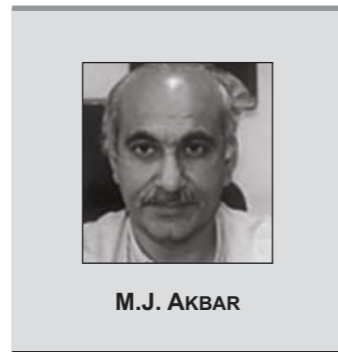
ing from the jolt that their organisation might have suffered as a result of the current operations. These are the people who claim to have been associated with a particular political party that is a part of the government, and have also been trained in madrasas.

And this is where the question of taking hard decisions by the government comes in. Whereas all this time it had displayed an ostrich like attitude by refusing to accept the reality, is it prepared to act against those within the alliance whose links to the radicals may come to be firmly established as a result of the arrest of the kingpins? And although not all madrasas can be painted with a broad brush of accusation of imparting radical ideas that are not only un-Islamic but also anti-Islam, there are certainly some that do so. Is the government willing to identify and take appropriate action against those?

It may be the end of the road for those radicals recently captured, but one cannot say with a great degree of conviction that it is the end of religious radicalism in Bangladesh. That is unless we address the reasons and arrest the people that compel such actions in the first place. And that is a matter of considerable deliberation and not a little commitment.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Separate deal



TROUBLE is, ma-in-law ain't approved of history yet. Arms-wide-open George Bush and simple-but-hardly-simplistic Manmohan Singh summoned history to witness their alliance. "We have made history today, and I thank you," Dr Singh told his guest in Delhi. Very coy, very nice. But it isn't legal yet. Marriage awaits mother-in-law's approval.

Mother-in-law is the Congress of the United States. She is particularly watchful about errant sons who declare victory before she has checked the fine print.

Once upon a time, long long ago, a President of the United States of America offered the President of Pakistan a whole bunch of F-16s, and even collected cash on the deal. Pakistan is still waiting to put those fighters to some historic use.

I don't want to be a party-pooper at a particularly cosy love-fest, but here are a couple of quotes printed in the March 3 edition of ma-in-law's favourite newspaper, the Washington Post. Republican Ed Royce, chair of the International Relations Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Proliferation, thought the Delhi deal had "implications beyond US-India relations" and that the "goal of curbing nuclear proliferation should be paramount." Democrat Edward Markey, co-chair of the bipartisan task force on non-proliferation, called the agreement "a historic failure of this president



It means, first, that while India will sign a limiting commitment on its nuclear program, Pakistan will sign nothing. Pakistan can, therefore, be held down to nothing. Bush is going to be in power for only another two years, and that as a terribly lame duck. His approval ratings are below freezing point, and his own party is distancing itself from him, raising the question as to whether he has the political capital to push anything through Congress. What are Pakistan's options? Pakistan's nuclear program has been created with China's help. China may not have technology as good as America's, but it isn't a junkyard either. As a friend, China will be much more reliable than America. This is not because of any character defect. America is a democracy, and therefore always vulnerable to democratic discourse. China is a dictatorship.

to tackle the real nuclear threats we face."

When ma-in-law talks from the side of her face she can be a tough old bird.

If history is made, then it will be certainly made in one respect: it will be the first time that India will sign an international protocol that has implications for its nuclear program and nuclear military assets. A series of Prime Ministers, cutting across party lines, has resisted the most serious pressure to sign on any dotted line. The potential to build a nuclear weapon was created by Jawaharlal Nehru; the ability to build it was confirmed by Indira Gandhi; the decision to go public was made by Atal Behari Vajpayee. The one thing they, and others in between, knew was that any signature became a commitment that might fetch flexibility in the present but could become a prison in the future.

Since this is the first agreement that India might have to sign, unless the American legislatures sabotage it or the present government in Delhi makes way for a more sceptical successor, I hope those who have drafted it have read every line, checked the top line, bottom line, underline and then checked the little comma hidden in the fine print that discusses the separation of 14

civilian nuclear plants from eight military ones.

This is a marriage built on separation, in more senses than one.

The two constituencies, Delhi and Washington, are offering distinctively separate narratives.

Here, in sum, is what the spokesmen of Dr Manmohan Singh will be telling us as they take their message to the country:

- This agreement will permit India to produce fissile materials for its nuclear military needs, despite the fact that the recognised nuclear powers have halted, voluntarily, such production.

- The fast-breeder reactors, which can make super-grade plutonium when fully operational, will not be under international inspection or safeguards.

- India can now hope to make up to 50 nuclear weapons a year, for the availability of imported uranium frees local supplies for use in military reactors.

- India gets the latest technology long denied to its scientists. Listen to the narrative on the American side, some of which has already begun to be articulated, even by the extremely sophisticated and persuasive American negotiator, Nicholas Burns.

- India enters the inspection

regime, a far better situation than the zero-influence that existed so far. (It needs to be pointed out, of course, that India rose from drawing board to major nuclear power, without indulging in theft, only because of this zero-influence, a status that the Manmohan Singh government is in the process of bartering away.)

- The fast-breeder reactors that India possesses will be isolated, and unable to get new technology, thanks to the inspections regime, ensuring, over time, stagnation or decline. Implication: India has been sold a lemon thanks to a gullible government.

- The deal brings India into the American zone of influence, and turns it into a virtual ally with a potential for assistance in American strategic interests (that is code word for American intervention). India's conventional arms program now shifts dramatically into the supply chain of the American industrial-military complex. If the Indo-Soviet treaty kept India within the Soviet camp till the Soviet Union collapsed, then this agreement will keep India in the American parlour for the foreseeable future.

- There is a great bonanza to American industry of arms sales (this will be the most persuasive

argument in the Senate, because the one thing a legislator does not want to be accused of is preventing jobs). The starting figure, according to Pentagon officials who admittedly have not dealt with Indian bureaucrats so far, is nine billion dollars. That is a lot of dollars. Keep counting, Senator!

- There is no political quid pro quo. The Soviet Union intervened when necessary to protect India's position on issues like Jammu and Kashmir with a veto in the Security Council. America has given no such commitment. Indeed, Delhi's leverage with Moscow is reduced with the shift in arms purchases. China will never support India over Pakistan in the Security Council and the West will have the pleasure of balancing Pakistan's interests with India's on issues like Kashmir.

With time, the narrative in Washington will doubtless take on other hues, since emerging questions will demand creative answers if the agreement is to be pushed through the Congress. Senator John Kerry publicly worried about fissile material during a visit to Delhi. Others are wondering whether such a reward for a nation that has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is not a signal for others to risk going nuclear. And then of course there is the weight of Pakistan's pressure to which there may not be any immediate give, but which will make its play in the coming months. Pakistan remains a frontline state in Bush's war on terror.

Such voices may not be consistent, or even necessarily logical, but they will demand to be heard. Some will pick up claims made in Delhi and ask the Bush administration for clarifications, as for instance on the delicate matter of how many nuclear weapons India is capable of making.

If Pakistan is truly lucky, it will have the extraordinary good fortune of escaping the Bush embrace. The indications are that Bush will not offer the terms of the deal with India to Pakistan. What does this mean?

It means, first, that while India will sign a limiting commitment on its nuclear program, Pakistan will sign nothing. Pakistan can, therefore, be held down to nothing. Bush is going to be in power for only another two years, and that as a terribly lame duck. His approval ratings are below freezing point, and his own party is distancing itself from him, raising the question as to whether he has the political capital to push anything through Congress.

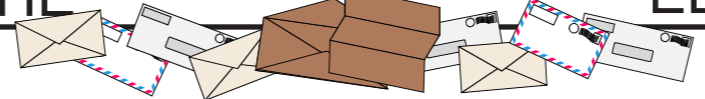
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China, most crucially, will not be propelled by mere goodwill or friendship; its policy will hinge on self-interest. Since a critical rationale for the Bush shift is to help India become a counterweight to China, Beijing will respond by playing the Pakistan card against India. China has already assured Pakistan three more nuclear reactors, and you never hear of any fuel shortage problems in Islamabad. President Pervez Musharraf has gone on record to say that Pakistan has its options. Is this what he meant?

We may never know what the complete truth is. But keep your ears open when the mother-in-law starts asking questions on Capitol Hill in Washington.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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.

Language monument in Canada

The Bangladesh mission has talked with Ottawa and Toronto mayors to convince them to erect a monument in honour of the International Mother Language Day. The Toronto mayor has responded very earnestly and ordered his officials to look into the matter immediately.

Ottawa citizens, and a widely read newspaper in Ottawa, described it as a "Monumental Idea". Canada played a very important role to have UNESCO declare 21st February as the International Mother Language Day.

Let us keep our fingers crossed to see Canada honour its multicultural tradition by building a monument in honour of our language heroes. **Masud Rana Sarker**
Ottawa, Canada

Makeshift eateries

I was tempted to taste some foods in Gulshan # 2 wayside fast food shops. The shops are located just at the entry point of the kitchen market and on the west-north corner of the DCC market which remain open only after the evening. The items were chicken fry, piazu, chops etc. While I was asking for some freshly prepared hot piazus, I heard somebody was asking his friend if he got enough 'nari bhuri' (entrails) of chicken. The friend replied that he did not have enough to make piazu. I became alert and bought three-four piazus. I had a bite on one and was about to vomit, as those were made of that stuff. I observed and I was almost sure that the fried chickens were made of dead chicken legs and other parts and sold at a very cheap rate.

Now my question is if there is anybody to look into these most unhygienic makeshift eateries. Recently, there was a big drive

against the big hotels, fast food shops and sweetmeat shops by mobile teams.

I would request the DCC to look into the matter.

Dr. S.M. Rahman
On e-mail

Public universities

It is in reference to the article "The continuing importance of public education" one of the two articles published in DS, both shedding light on higher education in the country.

The write-up gives a vivid picture of the situation prevailing in the public universities.

Roney
University of Chittagong

CDA plots

In July 2002, CDA invited applications for residential plot allotment for its Kolpalok residential area in Bakalia, Chittagong. Since, I am living abroad I have applied for an

allotment with the earnest money of approximately three thousand US dollars as a wage earner. I wrote a letter to the CDA to know the status of allotment process since it has been taking more than three years. Unfortunately, I have not yet heard from the CDA. Maybe, I will never receive any response from them.

I believe it is fair to ask why it is taking such a long time to complete the process. I would also like to bring the matter to the notice of the ministry concerned.

Khairul Bashar
New York, US

Take reforms seriously

First of all, I want to join the millions of people in applauding the opposition party's decision to join the parliament. Many predicted that AL would not join the parliament and its members would resign from it, but once more AL showed its sense

of responsibility as the second biggest party in the house. This will definitely not go in vain.

We saw how a dead parliament became vibrant. Now the question is electoral reform and how it's going to be done. The government cannot be too stubborn regarding this matter as it's going to be hard for them to make AL contest the elections under the existing system and without AL it's not going to be a proper election. The government needs to face this issue seriously to avoid any further political crisis. I think the prime minister should at least sit with opposition leaders to hear what they have got to say. They are not bound to follow what AL says, hence it would be wiser for them to sit and listen first.

BNP should very well remember that without elections it is not possible for them to run the country after Jan.2007. An election in Bangladesh means participation of AL and BNP, and without any one of these two, it will be no election. We, the people of a democratic

country, never like selection. The bomb blasts, high rate of inflation and widespread corruption, have already put the government in the back seat and it's not easy to drive sitting at the back. So, the last thing this govt. should do is take part in a one-party election. And the people wanting to disrupt our country's progress will only be encouraged by something like a farcical election. The government should also try to nab all the top terrorists before the elections as they might come handy for anybody trying to create anarchy in the country. I urge BNP to sit with AL and listen what they have to say about the reforms to the Election Commission and the Caretaker system. It's not a good time to instigate the opposition, especially when you are driving from the rear seat. The government must not think that they will somehow manage to take people's verdict on their side. If we don't vote for BNP, there is no way it can stay in power.

We, the people showed what we

could do in Chittagong. No power lies above our rights and we will do anything to protect them. Chittagong was a learning episode for BNP and it's better not to let anything of that kind to take place in future. BNP was voted to power by people and can any time be thrown out by them. The ultimate power always remains in our hands. If ice can melt to water in seconds, we, the people, can also change the government in a day.

A Rafat Islam
On e-mail

Politics today

It has become a pastime of the political leaders of our country to play with the republic's destiny. They hold the lebus of innocence and think how to make themselves rich by political mandate and appropriation of public property.

We do think when the time passes away. But most of our people know the motto that says- "Think before you do something." It

would not have been necessary to frustrate ourselves with such thoughts- if we had a leader like Mahathir.

We too had great leaders in the past who never compromised with the dictators and exploiters. They upheld the rights of people and were ready to make any sacrifice for that. But politics is a different proposition today. People whose only interest lies in earning money or having clout have found place in politics. And the result is that national progress is being hampered in many ways. We must find a way out of this intolerable situation. Else, we will have to pay a high price.

S. M. Shaikat
University of London, UK