

Wanton aggression in Lebanon

Robust UNSC action called for

AS Israel wreaks its wrath on Lebanon, apparently to settle scores with the Hezbollah, civilian casualties are rising sharply in an uneven battle where the innocent people are pitted against the sophisticated war machine of Tel Aviv. Nearly 300 people have already been killed and a great humanitarian crisis is looming large, as the Israelis are destroying all utility installations in Beirut.

The magnitude of the barbarity of the Israeli operations definitely called for a quick response from the international community in general and the UN Security Council in particular. But that was not forthcoming even after it became clear that Israelis were targeting civilians in violation of all international conventions and norms. And this is certainly a one-sided war as unarmed people are being bombed and shelled only because Prime Minister Ehud Olmert believes that there was no other option open to his country.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has put forward his plan to send a UN force to Lebanon with the objective of giving the Lebanese government a stronger grip on Hezbollah activities. The proposal for sending a stabilisation force to the beleaguered country has been made by the G-8 leaders. Without question, Lebanon needs help from the international community as it is now exposed to the monstrous firepower of Israel. However, time is an important factor that must be attached due importance to. Loss of time will certainly mean loss of more lives in Lebanon.

The UN Secretary General might just be doing as much as he can. But the point that we want to make is, why can't the Security Council convene an emergency meeting to discuss the Lebanon situation and appeal for an immediate cessation of hostilities? The world body must also issue a direct condemnation of Israeli atrocities.

If the Bush administration, which has not yet thrown its full weight behind a ceasefire move, is not convinced that Israelis are actually massacring people for no reason, it should listen once more to what the British expatriates leaving Lebanon said about the Israeli attacks. They have very rightly termed the aggression as a "crime against humanity." And accepting this crime as an exercise in Israel's "self-defence" will only make peace a more and more elusive goal in the Middle East. The world leaders can ill afford to ignore this plain truth.

Another onslaught on Buriganga

Save the river, please

THE story of our river banks being encroached upon and filling up of the adjoining areas to grab parcels of land is nothing new. Of late this is being done along the river Buriganga by dumping all kinds of household and industrial wastes. The encroachers have found a novel way of encouraging people of the locality to dump wastes on the pretext that there are no garbage dumping sites marked out on the river bank by the city corporation. Once filled, the encroachers emerge on the scene as virtual developers or real estate dealers. It appears as that there exists a nexus between the encroachers and the relevant authorities of the administration.

Such encroachments are not only narrowing down the banks of the river but also causing havoc to our environment. These have the potential for serious consequences not just for us but also for generations to come. The dumping of toxic wastes of all kinds has already polluted the river water to a dangerous level. This is seriously affecting the health of the people of the locality who are compelled to use murky water of the river for different purposes.

The administration simply must address this problem of encroachment of river banks on a priority basis. It is our understanding that an administrative arrangement exists by the name of a task force, headed by the shipping minister, to checkmate this type of land grabbing. The DCC has already confessed its inability to tackle this issue of garbage-ridden land expropriation due to shortage of manpower. It is now up to the high-power task force to act expeditiously and stop this menace from progressing further. Surely, given the will and the commitment we should be able to effectively deal with the issue in greater interest of the people who are already reeling in numerous other problems of governance.

Reaping the whirlwind



THE Mumbai blasts are once again very painful reminders of the utter helplessness of the many to the ill motives and the wicked actions of the few. But there are some important issues, which emerge from the incident that is worth expanding on.

But to start with I cannot resist quoting a friend of mine on the Indian government's reaction after the blasts. He writes: "New Delhi did not react by dispatching bombers, tanks, gunboats, and artillery to start a regional war, nor did she mete out collective punishment to people at random, nor kill innocents dubbed as 'collaterals'. If they did, I could not distinguish them from the 'equal opportunity killers' who blasted the Bombay train! Indeed, if New Delhi behaved like Washington DC or Tel Aviv, I'd be utterly disappointed. To me, that would be the demise of the last bastion of civilized people on earth. True, India spends \$32 billion in defense each year, but the country has not been taken over by war-profiteers—at least not yet." One could not agree more.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

But what is not surprising was the rush by the Indian media to link Bangladesh to the blasts, particularly the extremely premature comments on Bangladesh being the source of supply of the RDX has made light of a very serious matter. One is surprised how fast the Indian media's intelligence apparatus functions. It had verified and confirmed that the explosives were supplied from Bangladesh when even the Indian government agencies were and still are undecided as to the type of explosives used in the blasts, let alone ascertain the source of it.

However, one notices that perhaps for the first time recriminations are being hurled at the ruling alliance at the Centre by the BJP, which has used the scrapping of POTA as an issue to smash the UPA's anti-terrorism strategy, its kid-gloved handling of terrorism, ostensibly for political gains. This is quite what we get to see in Bangladesh.

A striking resemblance of the Mumbai blasts to our situation is the failure of the Indian intelligence apparatus to get wind of the matter or pre-empt this from happening, and being as yet without a definite idea as to the real perpetrators. And while we in Bangladesh are very prompt in pointing an accusing finger at the incompetence of the Bangladesh intelligence agencies for their inability in predicting such occurrences, our intelligence agencies can perhaps take comfort in the fact they are in elite company. But then, "we know what we know, but we do not know what we do not know" is an apt characterization by

a senior US counter-terrorism expert of the gap in our knowledge that constantly outruns our efforts to make up the shortfall of information in our fight against terror.

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One has to marvel at the competence of the Indian media at having determined definitively, not only the type of the explosives, but its source so very soon after the blasts. One feels that the South Asian media should refrain from

rushing to judgment and mutual blame game for the sake of objective investigation of the matter.

Apart from that, some Indian analysts have suggested that the perpetrators have been trained and worked out of bases in Pakistan and Bangladesh. There is a talk about terrorism being outsourced by Pakistan in order to "maintain deniability" to certain countries in South Asia and the Middle East, and Bangladesh is one of them. Some authors have quoted sources linking Bangladesh to the bombings.

One feels that the problem of terrorism we are faced today requires more objective evaluation of the issue and not knee-jerk reactions. Otherwise the menace will continue to grow and destroy the fabric of our society in South Asia. There are few things that we must recognise as being a reality and proceed to act from there.

First, several Islamists parties have emerged with radical views that resort to exploiting religion for

their tactical goals. In India, a section of the minority community that uses the real or perceived repression against them to motivate their fellow religionists to resort to violence, have set up these groups. In Bangladesh, these groups are made up of certain elements of the majority community but have quite a different charter, if not a separate modus operandi. They have grown more because of the internal political flux.

Link between them for ideological support, if nothing else, may not be entirely out of the realm of possibility. The linkages of the non-state elements, be it the Naxalites or the communist elements through the Maoist Coordination Committee or the LeT, HuJI or the HUM through their own net work, or the LTTE, have prospects to be more than a nuisance. Thus there is a need for a regional view to address this phenomenon concertedly and without any pre-conceived notions.

Secondly, as despicable as these acts are, and nothing can justify killing of innocent civilians, it will do no harm, in fact it would help in tackling the menace, to look into the reasons behind the blasts. In this context, comments of B Raman, an Indian analyst, appearing in a well-known think tank website following the July 11 blasts are worth a close look.

He says: "Jihadi terrorism in Indian territory outside Jammu & Kashmir is a post-1992 phenomenon and is attributable to the feelings of hurt and anger caused in the Muslim community -- particularly

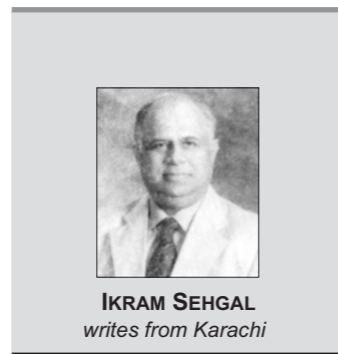
the Muslim youth -- by the demolition of the Babri Masjid ... aggravated from time to time by feelings of anger over alleged police atrocities against Muslims and over alleged police failure to protect Muslims. A third cause for anger since July last year has been the growing close relations with the US and the perceived failure or reluctance of the government of India to express itself openly and in strong language against the violations of the human rights of the Muslims by the US. Such feelings of anger have resulted in a series of acts of reprisal terrorism since 1993. One should not be surprised if there is an involvement of India Muslims in the blasts of July 11, 2006, too."

And in Bangladesh, the religious fanatics wanted to establish Islamic rule by killing innocent civilians. The counter-strategy will thus have to be country specific since handling of the religious radicals in Bangladesh will differ from the way it will be tackled in India or Pakistan. That also goes for those that are provoked by different political ideologies.

South Asia as such is in the vortex of the crisis with terrorism afflicting most of the countries in various degrees. Very little purpose will be served by failing to acknowledge the menace. Otherwise we may well be sowing the wind, its consequent whirlwinds we may not be able to withstand.

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A time to unite



THE terrorists who strike South Asia (mainly India) from time to time have a precocious propensity to do so close to a noteworthy event, e.g. whenever a US president (or someone likewise important) is about to visit the region. Despite the fact that India has a fair number of militants, Naxalites, Mizos, Nagas, Manipuris etc., with several thousands of square miles under their control and who are certainly not Islamic, any major terrorist activity is blamed immediately on Pakistan, lack of evidence notwithstanding!

That it also puts Pakistan on the defensive as a terrorist-ridden state (if not a sponsor) is not a coincidence anymore. Whoever thought up the Mumbai blasts (targeting first class railway compartments) did not have mayhem only in India's economic capital in mind.

Pakistan's image in the world (and existence as the only Muslim nuclear entity) was the real target. It is no coincidence that for the past four weeks the Economist, the Atlantic Monthly, Time, Newsweek, etc. etc. have been running remarkably similar articles attacking Musharraf and Pakistan, in that order, much before the Mumbai blasts. The coincidence goes on when you note the "accusations" list against Pakistan are strikingly in sequence.

AS I SEE IT

Whoever thought up the Mumbai blasts (targeting first class railway compartments) did not have mayhem only in India's economic capital in mind. Pakistan's image in the world (and existence as the only Muslim nuclear entity) was the real target. It is no coincidence that for the past four weeks the Economist, the Atlantic Monthly, Time, Newsweek, etc. etc. have been running remarkably similar articles attacking Musharraf and Pakistan, in that order, much before the Mumbai blasts. The coincidence goes on when you note the "accusations" list against Pakistan are strikingly in sequence.

Had not the Hezbollah kidnapping of the two Israeli soldiers invited a disproportionate response from Israel, and removed Mumbai from the prime media forces, Pakistan would have been on the rack, the major agenda item for G-8 world leaders at St Petersburg, an "unstable" Muslim nuclear state exporting terrorism.

It is no coincidence that right on cue the Indian PM, Manmohan Singh, on his way to the G-8 conference as an invited observer, implored G-8 leaders to condemn terrorism and its sponsors, making it quite obvious that he meant Pakistan. The Middle East violence put everything else for G-8 on the back-burner. Coincidences aside, this was a well planned media offensive, a meticulously orchestrated campaign whose timing for G-8 attention was upset by Hamas and Hezbollah.

Pakistan certainly has problems and it would be foolhardy to either deny it or try to gloss it over. These problems are not insurmountable and need to be addressed, by a Pakistan that is united in the face of adversity. The nation (and all its leaders without exception) must be aware of the profound danger to our continued status as a nuclear power, if not a real enough danger to our

existence as a nation. If Gen Musharraf fails to look reality in the eye, and correct the anomalies, then the rumours of his imminent departure (with apologies to Mark Twain) will not be greatly exaggerated.

Instead of the tribal areas (FATA) being our source of strength in time of war, they have become a weakness in time of peace. No state can permit any individual or group to point an armed finger at the state and get away with it, especially since most militants are aliens from Chechnya, Yemen, Uzbekistan, etc. While the campaign in South and North Waziristan is officially a "war against terrorism," a la the US, it is very much in Pakistan's own interests that we curb armed militants from having free rein. With the pervasive sympathy for Taliban within Pakistan's population (as opposed to Al-Qaeda) this is a Catch-22 proposition, with a damned if you do and damned if you don't caveat.

The government is now doing what it should have done in the first place, negotiate more and fight less, and be dynamically innovative. The whole of FATA must be designated as a Special Tribal Economic Zone (STEZ). Over the next year or so, the Afghan Transit Trade (ATT) must be phased out

completely, with STEZ providing for all of Afghanistan's requirements. The only ATT allowed should be public sector imports of foodgrains and POL products.

The government has done well by calling the Akbar Bugti bluff. After enduring two years of excesses inspired by him, the FC has reacted only when it was directly attacked. Most of his misguided followers have already surrendered unconditionally. It is time now to go on the offensive and eliminate the handful of militants still left with this cruel, sadistic and selfish old man stuck in the mountains.

The disturbances are confined only to two districts, the perception of a Province-wide revolt is a fiction, far more than the actual fact. The population, if not the area, is almost equally divided between the Baloch and the Pakhtun, the coastal tribes having no allegiance to either.

A "London Plan" about a greater Balochistan is certainly fashionable in Western strategic circles, more Iran-specific than Pakistan, in ethnic terms about 100 years too late from becoming a fact. The Gulf State involved in this conspiracy must be informed in clear, unambiguous, unequivocal language it

has much more to lose by playing such silly games.

The looming water problem, and the Shia-Sunni strife, has to be contained by following pro-active policies. The domestic media has to be mobilised to play a positive role. The assassination of Allama Hassan Turabi was shocking, and the government must pull out all stops to solve this beastly attack. Extermination is prescribed for all groups that are militant. At present they can be contained, in the near future they may run wild, fomenting anarchy a la Somalia.

The focus of governance should be on providing justice at all levels, the Honourable Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and his associates having done a tremendous job in restoring the credibility and authority of the Supreme Court (SC) of Pakistan. The judicial momentum should be focus on the Provincial High Courts, thereafter he subordinate courts. The SC should create salutary examples by handing out maximum punishment to those indulging in perjury. In criminal cases perjurers suffer the same punishment the accused would have got because of their false statements under oath. Stop the people from telling lies with impunity under oath and see how justice starts to prevail in Pakistan!

PPP and PML(N) remain major political parties, other than those in the current mainstream, PML(Q), MQM and MMA. Their leaders need to get involved in the process. Neither Benazir Bhutto nor Mian Nawaz Sharif is likely to stand on ego when the country faces such danger as now, one cannot doubt their patriotism.

The "Charter of Democracy" can be suitably amended in satisfying military's qualms in arriving at a co-existence formula. Putin put it very bluntly in so many words to US

President Bush when the Russian record of democracy was targeted during the G-8 Conference. The Russians do not want to have "a democracy such as in Iraq."

With the national security apparatus of the state remaining with the president, politicians across the board must control day-to-day governance. A formula for national reconciliation must address the reservations and aspirations of all the citizens of Pakistan.

Pakistan's image is taking a severe beating. International professionals, capable of a strategy of direct media action, have to be hired not only for damage control but also for positive image-making. If companies are hired that also pander to Indian interests then the effect of the conflict of interest will work against Pakistan.

For the sake of the country Pervez Musharraf must accommodate the legitimate demands of the opposition for real democracy to function. On their side, politicians, in or out of power, must understand the implications of the geo-political dangers and the consequences thereof.

Let us recognise that though Musharraf has managed to hold off the eventuality of our own 9/11 on Pakistani soil for 5 years, we have again become the prime target. The Indians simply had their timing go wrong, as happened with the contrived attack on Indian parliament in December 2001 (identity of attackers still unknown). Somewhat geo-politically naive, our major politicians are still patriotic. It is not a time to fight amongst ourselves, it is very much a time to unite.

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Can there be a BNP-JP election alliance?

Whatever Ershad may think about his party's support to BNP, it is extremely doubtful that the majority of JP will agree to JP-BNP alliance because of their suffering at the hands of BNP during the 1991-96 regime of Khaleda. They are also not very convinced about the success of BNP in the next election because of (i) exceptional price hike of essential commodities and (ii) lack of attention to problems of rural people. Thus, if Ershad insists on an alliance with BNP there may be a division in the JP.

ABMS ZAHUR

WITH no prospect in sight for any dialogue between the BNP-led four-party alliance and the AL-led 14-party alliance on preparation of an accurate and acceptable voter list, as well as caretaker government reform, the new attempt at reconciliation between the BNP and the JP has emerged as an interesting subject for animated discussion among the conscious citizens.

Through the discussion between Khaleda Zia, H M Ershad and Roushan Ershad was held in secrecy, our efficient press was active enough to gather adequate

information for reasonable speculation. Ershad told the press that the discussion mainly hovered round a private matter about the recovery of a residence of Mrs Ershad. Our press was smart enough to guess about the real agenda, an attempt to draw Ershad as an alliance partner in exchange for some benefit.

It is speculated in some quarters that Ershad's separation with Bidisha was mainly because of his strong desire to save the JP from disintegration. With regard to the present state of the 4-party alliance, reports are trickling down about growing pressure from a substantial section of BNP to make the party less dependent on Jamaat's

support, because of the recent exposure of various nefarious activities of JMB. Apart from this there are, reportedly, serious rifts in the leadership in certain constituencies and also the danger of division of vote banks of BNP.

Under the leadership of Khaleda Zia BNP has apparently emerged as a political party capable of facing any challenge from the Awami League. From a party dominated by retired armed forces personnel it has now become a party dominated by the business class. Should we call it demilitarisation and civilianisation?

However, merely serving the party is not enough, now one must have the ability to contribute sub-

stantially to the party funds to secure a leading position. Thus we see that a good number of senior dedicated activists of the party could not hold any important position in the alliance government. During the alliance rule for the last four and a half years the high command of the party failed to properly utilise the services of some mature, experienced, intelligent and efficient leaders.

It appears strange that even this jumbo cabinet (52-members) could not accommodate some of the most dedicated BNP followers. Perhaps the advisors of Hawa Bhaban have made some serious mistakes in choosing the cabinet ministers in a number of cases. Needless to say that some alliance ministers are more interested in their own welfare and less in the welfare of the people or even the party.

It has been reported that more than 58 per cent of BNP lawmakers belong to the business community. Because business people find little time for political work a majority of them have failed to attend even the

parliament sessions, though they are supposed to be believers in parliamentary democracy. The same may be true also in the operation of parliamentary committees.

The JP of Ershad, and Zia's BNP, are similar in structure and ideology. The founders of both the parties happen to be from the armed forces and, as such, are less democratic than AL (though AL's attempt to introduce Baksal was certainly undemocratic). Both JP and BNP depend too much on their chairpersons. In case of any serious mishap at the top the parties may be in serious trouble.

Khaleda Zia is, of course, trying to train her son to handle the intricate problems of party politics in future. In fact, Tareq Zia has started understanding the various intricacies of politics at the field level to avoid and overcome any danger of under-reporting or misreporting. In JP, on the other hand, some of its frontline leaders (such as GM Quader) are not happy about the dictatorial attitude of Ershad as the chairman of the party.

As indicated earlier everything is not going on well in BNP camp. The Young Turks are becoming increasingly ambitious and the senior politicians are gradually losing ground to the junior leaders. The most well-known example is the recent clash of personalities between Mr Saifur Rahman and Mr Ilyas (both lawmakers of BNP). Apparently the PM has ably controlled the situation.

The BNP-JP reconciliation bid is certainly an important event in Bangladesh politics. The JP was created mainly by turncoats from BNP after the assassination of Zia. In fact a majority of BNP leaders at that time thought that BNP would disintegrate because of lack of strong leadership. They could not rely on the weak leadership of an aging Sattar.

The emergence of Khaleda was indeed a miracle for the BNP. With no political experience she could convert BNP into a major political party with the strong help of BNP's student wing. However, this seems to have created a problem for the

high command now. It has become difficult to maintain a balance between the old stalwarts and the emerging new leadership.

JP does not have any problem with student politics because it did not have any student wing. JP does not have much hold in the south, except in some constituencies of Sylhet and Barisal. BNP's hold on the other hand is strong in the southern districts. Because of JMB activities in districts like Bogra and Rajshahi the image of BNP has been damaged to a certain extent in the north.

On the other hand JP still has some support base in Rangpur. It may be pointed out in this regard that in some constituencies in Chittagong BNP may lose some support because of internal conflicts. Because of possible changes in nomination for the next election BNP may lose a few seats in Feni and Noakhali also. An additional problem for BNP will be rather big demand for seats by JI.

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In the circumstances JP may opt for going alone, whatever may be the difficulties. In fact the image of JP is somehow brightening up because of administrative failures of AL and BNP during the last 15 years. However, these parties will remain major parties. With a better performance in the next election Ershad may be the kingpin in forming the government, because none of the major parties are likely to gain absolute majority.

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