

## Burning of newspaper

*Blatant attack on the press*

**W**HEN the political parties are crying hoarse for democracy from their rooftops and fighting for access to information, we see the despicable act of some activists of a political party commandeering and burning large number of copies of the Prothom Alo and The Daily Star. Apparently, these people have taken umbrage to reports appearing in the Prothom Alo relating to their party chairman's monetary misdemeanors. This is not the first time that copies of newspapers have been burnt because some people did not agree with certain reports published in the paper, and that is what gives one the cause for worry, because such psyche, fanning destructive attitudes of the party ranks against the print media, does very little for the image of politics and political culture in the country, not to speak of the lack of respect for others' viewpoint. We condemn this blatant attack on the press.

This is not only an act against freedom of the press, we consider it also an act of blatant infringement on the right to information of others, in that the large number of readers of these newspapers in various parts of the country were deprived of their copies of the papers of that day. This is not the correct way of demonstrating disagreement in a civilised society that claims to thrive on democratic norms, of which freedom of expression being one of the most important cornerstones. Burning papers or subjecting journalists to physical harassment is indicative of actions of those driven not by reasons but by their inability to accept the truth. It makes the episode even more disquieting to know that some of the party activists were, reportedly, led by people belonging to the legal profession.

The report may have been unpalatable to some. But if there was anything in it that some were not in accord with, there are well-established procedures that the aggrieved can take recourse to. If the account was deemed baseless, resorting to violence was certainly not the way to ventilate that feeling.

We restate our resolve to serve the people's right to know. We shall not be detracted by any threat or bullying from any quarter.

## Toll collectors target businessmen

*New crop of hooligans on the rise*

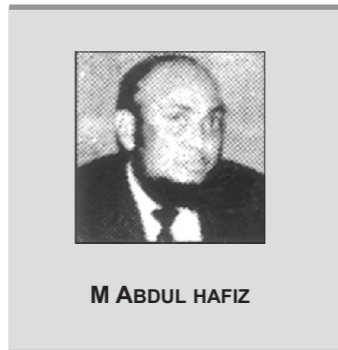
**B**USINESSMEN of the metropolis, especially shop and shopping mall owners, are being targeted by a new crop of young toll collectors, who have allegedly taken over the field operation when the listed major operators went underground following Rab actions. Media reports abound with horrendous stories of coercion, intimidation, physical assault and persecution of shop owners and general traders in almost all the areas in the city by these goons, who are known to maintain links with the members of the law enforcing agencies and local political leaders.

Incidents of fatal stabbing or shooting down of businessmen for refusing to pay tolls are not scanty either. The memory of the murder of a renowned elderly businessman and community leader of Mirpur area over toll collection is still fresh in everyone's mind. Some accused in the murder case have come out on bail and started toll collection immediately. And because of their dire threats, some businessmen of the same locality are being compelled to hire policemen from the local police stations to travel between their residence and place of work.

We fail to comprehend why the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner, as per report in a Bangla daily, denied the report of the increasing rate of crimes, especially toll collection in the city. He even went as far as to claim that situation has improved a lot and that toll collection has almost stopped. On the other hand, the ground reality is diametrically opposite to what he said, claim media reports. These reports have even specifically mentioned some areas in the city, such as, Mirpur, Pallabi, Kafrul, as being hotbed of criminals. It therefore remains unclear why the police high-ups fail to recognise existence of criminal activities there and take effective measures against the criminals.

We strongly believe that if the entire police force had shown the will to go all out against petty criminals like toll collectors, the city would have been a much better place to live in. No matter what power operates from behind, the onus of keeping society criminal-free lies with the policemen. The sooner they realise it the better.

# The die already cast?



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

**E**VEN as a deadlock over much-touted dialogue between the BNP and Awami League still persists and the fate of electoral reform proposals proffered by the latter remains undecided, the countdown to Election 2007 has practically begun. The party supremos on both sides are busy talking to the parties' grass-root workers to feel their pulse before the candidates are selected and an electoral roll is under preparation for the second time. The country's current political discourse revolves round the ensuing election and also the public mood is caught up with an election fever.

However, the baffled public looks askance as to what kind of election are we then heading

for without an electoral reform and the removal of a highly controversial chief election commissioner along with his commission. Much to the surprise of many, the cuckoo is still there in the nest, and in his quixotic manner is undertaking the preparation of another electoral roll with a fresh splutter of eccentricities.

He already squandered away over Tk 60 crore and disregarded a court ruling in preparing a thoroughly flawed and unusable voter list that has since been rejected under public pressure. Mystery thickens when there is no government initiative in ousting this unwanted CEC lacking public trust by forming a judicial council even after important minis-

## PERSPECTIVES

**The next election is the most crucial one in our national history. It's going to mark a defining moment for us as to which way we would proceed. Bangladesh today is at a cross-road. Through the next election we have to decide which course would we adopt. The rampart of our statehood is already assailed and the values upon which the country was created are being challenged. The country is held hostage to a handful of predators who are plundering the country's remaining assets.**

ters showed their embarrassment at his achievements.

In a mischievous move, the government already increased the Judges' age-limit for service with an ill-intentioned motive of having its man in the slot of the head of the caretaker government. As the time is fast running out and there is no headway either in dialogue or electoral reform, it may be an establishment ploy to make the opposition accept the fait accompli in participating in the election under existing arrangement. The opposition which has committed a series of gaffes may go along the government's persuasion under internal and external pressure. If that happens not only the election will enjoy no

credibility, the country will perpetually be in turmoil.

Earlier in 1991 and 2001, when Awami League complained of election rigging few believed it. It was looked upon as the AL's chronic inability to accept unpleasant reality. This time things are different. The people are totally alienated from the government which itself is discredited almost on all fronts. In fact, we are going to have an election against a backdrop of devastation caused by the alliance government's misuse, unparalleled corruption, and price hike of the essentials through syndicated market manipulation. The nation today is on the verge of being torn apart, with the government's nexus with anti-

liberation forces and apparent acquiescence in the rise of the religious militancy. If the past is any guide, a disgruntled and disgusted public will certainly not vote the alliance back to power.

Yet a party that was born in power and another that was rehabilitated in politics through the government's patronage cannot sustain without the elixir of power. They also have to safeguard their ill-gotten fortunes. It may be recalled that another brand of "nationalists" who participated in Ershad era looting swiftly switched over to BNP in 1991. That gives a valid reason to believe the alliance will make a last-ditch effort to cling to power through means fair or foul. That they will adopt unfair means in the next election amidst a decline in their acceptability is apparent from some of the actions they have already taken.

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would we adopt. The rampart of our statehood is already assailed and the values upon which the country was created are being challenged. The country is held hostage to a handful of predators who are plundering the country's remaining assets.

The next election, it must be remembered, is not just another election. Only a free, fair, and neutral election conducted by a set-up enjoying public confidence can perhaps rescue us from an abyss of ignominy. The vested interests are powerful. Unless we firmly resist them, the entire purpose of the election will be defeated. There are tell-tale evidences that the die is already cast. Even if it is so, we have to recast it, preserving the best of the nation's interests. Ultimately it is the people's wish that reigns supreme.

There is some silver lining in the new awareness growing among the politicians, civil society, professional group, business classes, and so on. They all are playing a constructive role in ensuring a credible election. The election must be free and fair. Then it is immaterial as to who wins.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

# Lebanon overshadows G-8 summit

**After the change of government in October 2001, Bangladesh lost interest in the LDC group and we have also fallen behind in reaching the Millennium Development Goals. Consequently, Bangladesh was not invited to the last five G-8 Summits. India and China have been attending the G-8 Summits for the last four years as emerging Asian powers. But who will speak for the poor people of Asia? Since Germany is showing renewed interest on poverty alleviation issues, Bangladesh should strive to restore her position and play a prominent role at the next G-8 Summit.**

SYED MUJAZZEM ALI

**L**EADERS of top seven industrialized countries and Russia commonly known as G-8 -- concluded their annual two-day Summit in St. Petersburg last Monday. President Putin had hoped that the first ever G-8 Summit held on Russian soil would restore his country's global status as a major player. Little did he know that the sudden explosion of violence in the Middle East, triggered off by Israeli air strikes against Lebanon, would overshadow his Summit priorities! Putin claimed that "all the aims" of the Summit have been "achieved" but at the same time, he acknowledged that "everything was knocked to one side to some extent by the events in the Middle East."

Even otherwise, the G-8 Summit this year ended without a tangible breakthrough on the disputes that divide them, and the two key issues, namely Russia's energy war with the EU and its bid to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), remained unresolved with no prospect for early resolution.

Though leaders spent considerable time on Israel-Lebanon crisis, there was no agreement to stop the current round of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah forces. There was no joint call for

a cease fire. The declaration merely glossed over the sharp differences between President Bush's position in support of Israel and the views of other G-8 members that Israel was using excessive force in Lebanon. Bush, unaware that his private remarks to Prime Minister Blair were being picked up by the microphone, bluntly expressed his frustration with Hezbollah. In no time, the media started paying more attention to this gaffe than on the substantive discussions on the issue.

The Declaration specifically blamed militant groups, Hamas and Hezbollah, for the current escalation of violence and asked Israel to exercise restraint. British Prime Minister Tony Blair and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan were proposed sending an international peace keeping force to stop the fighting between the two warring parties but there was no agreement on this proposal.

Host Putin had earmarked energy security as the top priority of this year's Summit to underscore Russia's standing as the world's second largest supplier of oil after Saudi Arabia. There was an emerging complimentary relation as Russia wanted security of demand, while the US and Europe wanted security of supply. But the devil was in details. The Western countries wanted Russia to reduce state control of its

energy sector and open it to free market mechanism. With the oil prices above \$75 a barrel, Putin was unwilling to toe the western line.

Russia surely needs huge foreign investments to modernize its oil industry and expand its energy exports, but Putin felt that the Western investment would not be forthcoming even if he accepted those preconditions. Given such divergences, there was no concrete progress and the Summit declaration essentially voiced vague free market commitments.

Putin's bigger humiliation, however, was his inability to get the endorsement of Washington to his country's longstanding bid for WTO membership. He was hoping that his "friend" Bush would concede at the Summit and let his country join the group. But Americans were in no mood to overlook Moscow's refusal to open its market to food imports and deal with computer and DVD piracy. This deadlock eventually robbed him the public relations success he wanted as the Summit host.

Another major disappointment was the Summit's failure to make real progress on the Doha round of WTO trade talks. The leaders of China, India, South Africa, Mexico and Brazil were invited by the G-8 leaders for discussions on key

trade issues before the WTO round of talks. It was soon apparent that the gulf between the interests of rich and poor nations was too wide and needed to be bridged.

The talks were aimed at persuading the industrialized countries to reduce their agricultural subsidies and to cut tariffs on agricultural imports from poor countries. In exchange, the industrialized powers had hoped to persuade the developing countries to open their markets to industrial goods and services. The talks, however, produced no breakthrough as it was evident that instead of reducing agricultural subsidies, the US and European Union members have, in fact, continued to increase their farm subsidies. Without offering any new proposal, the G-8 leaders merely extended their deadline for negotiations to mid-August, and left it to their respective ministers to resolve the issue. It is unlikely that the ministers would be able to negotiate an agreement within a month.

The biggest losers in St. Petersburg seem to be the Least Developed Countries, mostly from Africa. They could make only modest gains as compared to the generous \$50 billion debt cancellation package which was offered to them at last year's Summit. Putin had limited interest on the issue. Consequently, there was hardly any forward movement on the subject at the Summit and it did not get the attention it deserved. The only encouraging news that emanated from the parley is German Chancellor Angela Merkel's promise to make poverty the top priority issue at the next year's G-8 Summit, which her nation will be hosting.

It is a pity that the poverty issue has been addressed by the G-8 leaders only in the context of African countries for the last five years although more people live below the poverty line in South Asia than in any other region of the world. The G-8 leaders had invited our former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina along with other LDC leaders to the G-8 Summit in Genoa, Italy in July 2001. Bangladesh had received the attention in view of her successful poverty alleviation programs at government and non-government levels and also on account of her effective Chairmanship of the LDC group.

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The G-8 leaders also focused on more traditional summit fare, but the issue of nuclear proliferation got more prominent attention. The leaders categorically asked North Korea to stop its missile tests and to abandon its nuclear program. As regards Iran, the leaders expected that Iran would react positively to the concrete incentives being offered to them for the development of civilian technology and not try to make nuclear weapons.

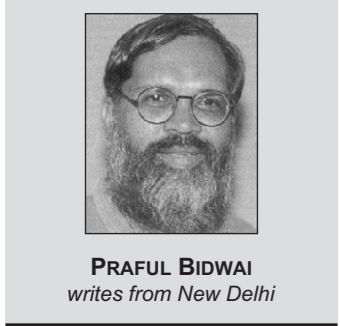
Putin had also set out to focus on three global issues, that is, infectious diseases (mostly bird flu, malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS), education and terrorism. On the first two issues the Summit called for usual greater international cooperation, but on the third it was more categorical. The Summit expressed outrage over recent bombings of commuter trains and the leaders expressed their resolve to fight terrorism "by all legitimate means."

The just-concluded G-8 summit has once again demonstrated that the members lack political will to reach any breakthrough on the issues that divide them. Furthermore, the members have different sets of priorities and this is reflected when the host country fixes the agenda. As noted earlier, the poverty issue was at the top of the agenda at the last Summit in Scotland, but this year the issue was relegated to a much lower rung. This lack of continuity will surely create credibility gap for the Group in the international arena.

The top seven industrialized countries account for 65% of global economy and, naturally, their pronouncements and actions have direct bearing on global economic scene. The G-8 Summits are, therefore, viewed with utmost importance by the policy circles all over the world and the Group should address the pressing global issues on a sustained basis. Otherwise, the group would soon lose its primacy and relevance.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

# Beyond knee-jerk responses: Tackling terrorism rationally



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

**F**ROM internal confusion to blaming "external" agencies. That's how the state responded to India's second worst serial-bombing incident. The response wasn't commensurate with the shocking loss of 200 lives in Mumbai.

This toll is about the same as in the 2004 Madrid bombings Europe's worst-ever terrorist incident which led to the Spanish government's collapse.

There's speculation that terrorists targeted first-class suburban rail coaches in Mumbai mainly to kill affluent Gujaratis who live in Malad

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and Kandivalis revenge for the Gujarat pogrom. But only 15 percent of those killed were Gujarati. Had Gujaratis been the main target, the terrorists would have bombed Kandivali/Malad stations.

We must equally dismiss all that claptrap about the "Spirit of Mumbai." True, Mumbai struggled to quickly regain some sanity through its citizens' admirable solidarity. But it's ludicrous to equate ordinary people's survival struggle with the elite's craving to shore up the Senex.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has tried to politicise the issue by accusing the government of "trading" national security for "votes." This implies that "Muslim appeasement" has encouraged terrorism. The charge is sickeningly communal.

The UPA, too, didn't cover itself with glory. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's bland, emotionless speech failed to register the gravity of the tragedy.

The Indian establishment was divided. The hardliners, led by National Security Adviser MK Narayanan, planted stories about the involvement of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Students' Islamic Movement of India and other "Pakistan-backed" agencies. But the external affairs and home ministries initially said that the India-Pakistan dialogue wouldn't be affected.

Ultimately, the government's "natural" instincts produced a mindless ban on access to all Internet blogs!

The Mumbai police rounded up hundreds of Muslims without even a

"midnight knock." They kicked open the doors of their homes, violating their dignity.

The bombings raise questions about the perpetrators' identity and motives. A major issue is whether the government was right to put Foreign Secretary-level talks on hold unless Pakistan honours its commitment that its territory wouldn't be used for anti-India terrorism.

Although horrifying, the Mumbai killings don't pose a systemic challenge to India. No sub-state organisation anywhere has successfully mounted such a challenge. For all the resources and fanatical cadres its command, al-Qaeda has failed to repeat 9/11 in the US. The threat to Indian democracy from the communal Right is far graver.

Neither Indian intelligence agen-

cies nor the police have produced any convincing, rigorous evidence identifying Mumbai's culprits or their external links. All we have is speculation.

This is no different from the "clues" offered in countless cases, from Mumbai to Varanasi, and Coimbatore to Jammu. That virtually no convictions were secured in these cases is a shameful comment on the police's slipshod work in generating evidence.

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The timing of such acts may be unrelated to specific events. Groups commit them simply when their cadres and weapons are in place. Nothing suggests that the bombings were meant to avenge a special

humiliation or injustice, such as the post-Babri violence in Mumbai, or the Gujarat carnage.

Responsible governments don't change policies on the basis of imperfect, flimsy evidence. The Vajpayee government mobilised 7 lakh troops at the border in response to the 2001 Parliament attack. It sustained the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation for ten long months at enormous expense. India and Pakistan twice came close to the nuclear brink.

Yet, India achieved none of its stated objectives, including the release of any among the list of 20 criminals handed over to Pakistan.

There's no credible evidence of official Pakistani involvement in the Mumbai bombings. Such involvement scarcely makes sense given that Gen Pervez Musharraf is a jihadi target, that Pakistan has deployed 60,000 soldiers against al-Qaeda, and that it is under close watch of the international community as regards its anti-terrorism commitments. Harping on Pakistan denies that today's terrorism, and its causes, are rooted in India. India would be ill-advised to

jeopardise the peace process. Rather, it should explore Pakistan's offer of joint investigation, along with a multilateral agency like Interpol.

The India-Pakistan dialogue has worked, despite its flaws and now-slackened pace, in both countries' interest. Several barriers to people-to-people movement have been broken down with an unprecedented 1.7 lakh people crossing the border in six months. India has created, to its own benefit, conditions conducive to economic and cultural cooperation with Pakistan.

India's biggest gain is the crucial assurance from President Musharraf that Pakistan would discuss Kashmir within a framework that rules out redrawing borders. Here lies a big peace dividend, which can free us of the psychological, military and political burden of rivalry. It would be self-defeating to miss it.

Mumbai holds a larger lesson. No state can guarantee absolute security and assuredly prevent terrorism. However, it can do three things. First, it can encourage greater alertness, and methodically collect information on suspect groups.

It can install simple surveillance equipment, such as closed-circuit television cameras, at transport hubs. It shouldn't emulate London, with its half-a-million hidden cameras.

Second, the government can, and must, provide advance warning, and emergency relief, including medical help, evacuation and rehabilitation, to victims. Citizens needn't feel that the state can prevent all violence, only that it is doing its utmost to help them. This can only happen if violence is thoroughly investigated, and culprits convicted, in a revamped justice delivery system.

Finally, the government must sort out "inter-agency politics." India's 10 intelligence agencies work at cross-purposes. Their top officers are often appointed on cronist considerations.

This must stop. We must understand how terrorist groups work, and the associative bonds that consolidate them. Without this, our agencies will fail to bring terrorists to book. Their knee-jerk responses are the last thing we need.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.