

BNP's unfortunate clean chit to the EC

A case of political posturing

It is very surprising, to say the least, that two ministers of the BNP would pay a visit to the Election Commission and give, what is to our mind, a clean chit to the CEC on its activities related to the updating of the voter list. Given the EC's recent track record, it is most unfortunate. The comments, compared to the observations, not long ago, of two senior most members of the BNP, that reflected rather their negative opinion on the doings of the CEC, lead us to think that either the BNP leadership is not on the same grid on the EC performance, or else it is up to the worst form of electioneering politics. Otherwise, one would not be so profusely adulatory to say that he was satisfied with the present activities of the EC, given the series of irrational action and thoroughly obtuse position of the CEC on the voter list. Those that want a foolproof voter list would certainly be dismayed to hear the BNP ministers who called on the CEC recently, echo his view that belittles the majority's concern about the voter list preparation.

When the EC's shenanigans have been so abundantly exposed, which had given rise to issues that need not have occurred had the EC acted more astutely, the remarks of the two gentlemen are highly misplaced. One wonders whether it is an exercise in damage control, that the EC was subjected to adverse criticism of government high ups including the law minister, that has caused the BNP brain trust to rethink and prompt them to act to regain ground that they feel they might have ceded to the opposition and which they feel might give the opposition the upper ground in the next election.

Every one is interested to see that the forthcoming national election is held freely, fairly and credibly. But the imperceptive, unintelligent and vacillating position of the CEC, on the singular most important matter that helps a credible election take place, the voter list, has divested him of even a kernel of respectability and credibility that the head of a statutory body must have. The recent comments of the two ministers are nothing but political posturing by the ruling party that is better avoided.

Opposition's road march

Commendable restraint shown by the two sides

THE road march organised by the 14-party opposition alliance has so far been peaceful, with the demonstrators remaining disciplined and the law enforcers not showing their usual proclivity to pounce on them. This is really a welcome change, especially when we are witnessing that political agitation invariably leads to chaos and even bloody clashes.

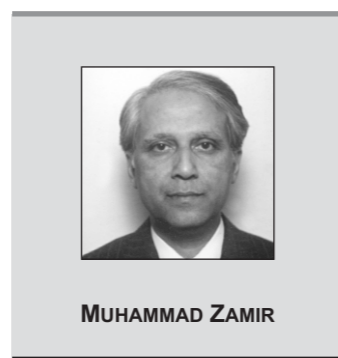
The government, for its part, deployed the police to ensure the security of the marchers. Strangely enough, this routine job appeared to be an exceptional one, as the police have on most occasions been very hostile to the demonstrators, which inevitably resulted in violence. If a road march could proceed so smoothly under the close vigil of the security personnel, what was the compelling necessity to aggressively intercept the opposition processions in the recent days?

The opposition has heeded the good counseling of the sane elements in society who have always been opposing hartal as a means of putting pressure on the government or attaining any political goal. The damage that a hartal causes to the country far outweighs the political gains (if any) made by the opposition. So, the emphasis has been on finding out less disruptive ways of expressing dissent.

Though people suffered due to the traffic jams on the roads during the march, there was the general sense of relief as no untoward incident happened. It was essentially a matter of allowing some space to the opposition -- something that the Awami League and its allies have been complaining about for a long time.

The issues like public inconvenience, disruption of normal life, and subversion of economy have to be treated in all seriousness by the political parties on either side of the divide. It has been a sad feature of our politics that the parties have failed to make the parliament the centre of all political activities. They tend to rely on street agitation, which often turns out to be highly disruptive to the busy city life. It is time the parties chose peaceful ways of demonstration, like they did on this occasion, without causing worries to citizens.

Search for peace through violence?



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

It has become clear over the last month that the conflict in Lebanon and the intrusion of Israeli forces into Gaza has little to do with the retrieving of three captured Israeli soldiers or the release of thousands of Arab prisoners held by Israel. This time, the kidnapping of the soldiers has become an excuse for trying to 'remove Hezbollah, once and for all from the southern territory of Lebanon' and to deal Syria and Iran body blows by proxy at the same time.

Today, Israel is repeating the same tactics it has used without success at least five times before in Lebanon since 1968. This has included the destruction of that country's infrastructure its bridges, roads, telephone and TV transmission towers, electricity generation plants and the Beirut airport. They have similarly targeted political institutions, and attempted to assassinate militant leaders. This has also been a replication of actions undertaken against the Palestinians.

There has however been a slight difference this time round. Israeli action has not gone unchallenged. More than a month after hostilities started, despite continuous Israeli air strikes, Hezbollah rockets of all descriptions, continue to rain down on northern Israeli cities. For the first time such attacks have also targeted the Israeli port of Haifa and forced Israeli civilians to seek air raid shelters. Some Israeli civilians have also been forced to flee from their homes. This has inversely created political

pressure on the newly elected Israeli government and upped the ante. It has also made Israel much more inflexible.

Such an approach by Israel has not helped matters. Observers in the region have reported that more than half a million people in Lebanon are internally displaced. Add to this another two hundred thousand in Palestine. We have also seen the steady rise in the figure for casualties. Now more than 500 are dead in Lebanon and Palestine and another 30 in Israel. The vast majority of these are civilians nearly 30 per cent being young women and children. Many thousands have also been wounded and are in desperate need for medical attention. Humanitarian disasters are being reported every day. Nearly 30,000 foreign nationals resident in Lebanon have been evacuated, mostly to Cyprus. They have been lucky ones. Nearly 200 Bangladeshis are still stranded and waiting for evacuation via Syria.

Vulnerable people women, children and the elderly are suffering collective punishment under the open sky. Israel probably thinks that this pain and deprivation will turn the civilian population against Hezbollah. Their calculations might be incorrect. Instead, it might end up creating more extremist groups. We have seen the G-8 leaders meet and disperse. We have not seen any consensus or remorse. Some have expressed alarm and anger and others have exposed

their indifference by trying to only find whom to blame for this latest round of violence. President Bush has assigned culpability squarely on Hezbollah and Hamas and demanded that they should lay down their arms. His senior officials have also insisted that Syria should apply pressure on Hezbollah to end its attacks on Israel. Unfortunately, contrary to international opinion, there has not been any single reference by the US to the disproportionate use of force by Israel.

Most interestingly, the Vatican has come out in a strong way on this issue. It has slammed the 'immobilisation of the United Nations' and the erosion of its latent powers because of 'clashing veto rights' in the UN Security Council. Spain, unlike many others in Europe has called on Israel to 'end hostilities and respect international law.' Well, neo-cons in Washington must have wagged their fingers at this; because the Spanish Prime Minister, in the same breath, pointed out that the war in Iraq has been a 'disaster' and had led to 'radicalisation, fanaticism, conflict and instability in the region instead of opening a horizon of peace.' Strong words indeed.

One thing, at least, is however very obvious. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (whose military career was limited to occasional stints as a reporter for the Israeli army's in-house magazine), through his recent actions has only demonstrated his lack of political and military experience. He has also

shown his desperation to prove that he is as strong as the comatose Ariel Sharon.

In fact, in more ways than one, we are tempted to recall at this juncture, the Israeli response in June, 1982 to the attempted assassination of their Ambassador Shlomo Argov in London by the Palestinian group of Abu Nidal. Israeli responded by bombing PLO bases in southern Lebanon and eventually, under Ariel Sharon, then Israeli defense minister, invaded Southern Lebanon. The last few days have seen a familiar pattern repeating itself. Two decades later, Israeli occupation is again underway in the battle-scarred littoral of the eastern Mediterranean. The only difference is that the PLO has been replaced by the Hezbollah as Israel's antagonist in that area.

Israel, and indirectly the USA, also appear to be viewing this latest military engagement in Lebanon, as a surrogate war not only against Syria and Iran but also militant Shiitism. Due to misplaced analysis, they are thinking that within the next few weeks or months, they will be able to marginalise Hezbollah and restore some degree of sovereignty in southern Lebanon. I am afraid this is not going to happen.

Both Israel and the USA have a serious problem. It is their absence of diplomatic contact with the parties on the other side Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. Rami Khouri, editor of Beirut based

newspaper 'Daily Star', writing in the July 24 edition of 'Newsweek' has significantly observed that 'the world's only global power, America, is particularly powerless in the current crisis in the Middle East, due to its own biased policies.'

This deficiency has also been noted by Sandy Berger, former National Security Adviser in the Clinton Administration. In this context, he has commented that 'you don't just negotiate with your friends. Sometimes you negotiate with your enemies, or at least your adversaries. We (the USA) negotiated with the Soviet Union for 50 years.' One can only conclude that bush and the Congress hard-line support for Israel are further complicating Middle East diplomacy.

I had the opportunity of transiting through Dubai airport a few days ago on my way back from Cyprus. During the stop-over, I talked with some foreign nationals who had been evacuated from Lebanon and also some Lebanese businessmen. It was apparent from their comments that the destruction of Lebanon's modern economy and the unprecedented stresses on its government will not help create long-term stability along Israel's borders. They also pointed out another important fact. They observed that growing civilian casualties were fueling withering criticisms inside Lebanon against not just Israel, but also the USA, which is widely viewed as encouraging and enabling the Israeli onslaught. This development has

negated US popularity gained after the ouster of the Syrian armed forces contingents from Lebanon.

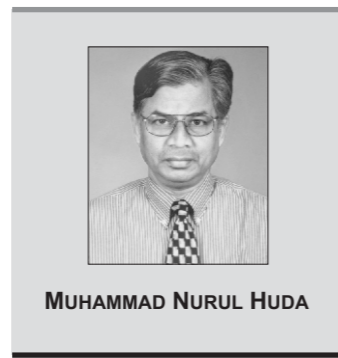
Israel has a jagged, porous border stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to Syria in that region. It traverses mountains and valleys, rivers and in some places, lush forest. It will indeed be very difficult for Israel to ensure a totally sterile environment in that area despite its current massive strikes. Both Israel and the USA know that several UN Resolutions have called for the disarming of Hezbollah. There is also UN Resolution 1559 guaranteeing Lebanon's sovereignty. However, Hezbollah's popularity has not reduced. In fact, its opponents within Lebanon's political mosaic know that trying to force this group to disarm might lead to a civil war.

What is needed now is immediate cease-fire. Secretary Rice has to sit and sort out the insecurity complex that has affected Israel. Talking with President Mubarak and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia will not be enough. If Israel needs guarantees, let that be given by deploying armed contingents from the armed services of all the five permanent members of the Security Council to the border between Israel and Lebanon. They could then function as effective peace-keepers and make the existing UN presence that much more meaningful.

Israel should also be persuaded to halt its illegal offensive in Gaza and also withdraw from its occupied territories. I cannot condone or support the indiscriminate shooting of rockets into Israel and the killing of its civilians. Similarly, what is happening in Gaza and Lebanon is against the principles of international law and humanitarian conduct. Children dying under bombed rubble due to lack of proper rescue facilities should single US and Israeli conscience.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Controlling police and all that



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

DURING a recent exchange of views with the media some senior police officers of the Dhaka Metropolitan outfit have reportedly expressed the view that the police cannot perform their functions in the expected manner due to the political control by the government over their activities. There was also a mention of the increasing preoccupation with order duties in connection with political disturbances and that such engagement has been responsible for little attention and activity for crime prevention and detection functions. Such policy directions should be given openly and made known to all members of parliament.

Control, autonomy and oversight

In a system of governance historically blemished by the abuse of political authority, the victimisation of political opponents through police force is a routine affair in countries of South Asia including Bangladesh. This misuse coupled with the widely-held perceptions of police inefficiency, corruption, highhandedness and a culture of looking outside the organisation for patronage is part of a deepening crisis confronted by the police force of Bangladesh.

The Indian National Police Commission of 1977 which made meaningful effort to reform the police system had the following to say on the control element -- "The crux of police reform in our country today is to secure professional independence for the police to function truly and efficiently as an impartial agent of the law of the land and at the same time to enable

the government to oversee the police performance to ensure its conformity to law."

In view of the above, it is only natural that if we desire the growth of real professional policing, we have to start breaking the long-existing nexus of unthinking bureaucracy and politicians. We have to ensure that the investigative tasks of the police are beyond the kind of intervention by the political executive. The government may lay down broad policies for adoption in respect of only the preventive and service-oriented functions. Such policy directions should be given openly and made known to all members of parliament.

If we want our police to act apolitically then we have to ensure that government discharges its superintending responsibility in an open manner. One way to do that would be to set up a public safety commission or a security commission which amongst others should --

i. Lay down broad guidelines for the performance of preventive and service-oriented functions by the police.

ii. Evaluate the performance of the police every year.

iii. Function as a forum of appeal to dispose representations from officers regarding their being subjected to illegal orders and regarding their promotions.

iv. Generally review the functioning of police force.

The principal purpose behind the creation of the above proposed security commission is to insulate police from politics. We have to be candid to discuss clearly about the vexed issue of political interference in the internal administration of police. It is no secret that the threat

of transfer is often used by the political executive as a tool to drive officers to subvert rule of law and to indulge in questionable practices. We have to appreciate that this leverage with the executive lowers the morale of upright officers and affects the discipline of the service. The question is -- are we ready to counter the motivated and arbitrary removals of non-piant officers by laying down fixed tenure for key police appointments and also requiring the authorities to record grounds of premature transfer for independent scrutiny by the proposed public safety commission?

We have to ask ourselves if our society, through its elected leaders want i) the creation of institutional structures that ensure political neutrality and democratic control of the police; ii) adoption of a unified chain of command of the police; iii) establishment of a recruitment and selection system of personnel based on merit. The police need to be depoliticised and their recruitment, postings, transfers, training and career development ensured on merit.

Statutory support

Our police owe its creation to the Police Act of 1861. The salient characteristics of police organisation produced by the Act are i) principal aim is the preservation of status-quo; ii) lays major emphasis on maintenance of order and avoidance of breach of peace thereby over-emphasising the constabulary functions of the police against the professional aspect of crime control. This organisation was designed not to attract talent to ensure built-in subservience of the police to the executive administration regardless of the resulting corruption, lack of professional

excellence, police highhandedness and police-public estrangement.

We need a new Police Act whose principal features should be as under:

i. It redefines in clear terms the role and responsibilities of police.

ii. It seeks to improve human security and access to justice within the ambit of rule of law.

iii. It phases out obsolete police management practices.

iv. It provides for enhancing police professionalism.

v. It introduces new powers to improve police discipline.

vi. It strengthens external police accountability through institutionalised civil society oversight.

vii. It aims to transform the police into a public-friendly service-delivery organisation.

viii. It makes it obligatory for the government to establish police-public consultative committees.

The undefined open-ended 'Superintendence' of police in the hands of political executive has to change for ensuring efficient and lawful police performance. The need is to replace the ruler-driven police with a community-based police through the institutional mechanism of Public Safety Commission or Security Commission. Such statutory body should have wide-ranging powers and be a broad-based body incorporating, amongst others, women, civil society members, and the political opposition. The goal should be to foster credible police accountability, gender sensitive enforcement and operational neutrality. The core problem of insulating the police from the illegitimate political, bureaucratic or other extraneous interference

should engage our serious attention.

The attitude

It would not be possible to effect meaningful changes or reform in police operations without a broad agreement across the political landscape on the future role and responsibilities of police. Financial constraints have been a factor for stalling progress but it is primarily the influential and vested quarter within the ruling elite that has proved to be a major stumbling block in the way of police modernisation. The reality is that recommendations even without financial implication do not attract appropriate intervention.

The inability of top police management to resist organisationally debilitating extraneous pressures and to bring about attitudinal change in the subordinate personnel is significant impediment to operational freedom. When core reform entails responsibility many functionaries develop a lukewarm attitude.

The way forward

Making the police public-friendly should be the central issue in the reform effort. We need to examine police organisation, its mandate, its functional dynamics. The reform process has to call for a commitment and sense of purpose from the political executive as this involves essentially a re-determination of the whole governance paradigm.

The reality on ground is that valid organisational principles have been violated over the years resulting in corrupt, inefficient and highly politicised police forces in our region. The police have acted as agents of the political executive

rather than as instruments of a democratic state. The selective application of law against opponents, whether political or personal has been the norm rather than the exception. People perceive police as agents of party in power and not as an organisation publicly maintained to enforce the rule of law.

The question is which style or model of policing can bring a change in the existing high level of police-public estrangement? How police can be brought under democratic control yet ensuring its political neutrality?

To begin with, the responsibility of maintenance of law and order will need to rest exclusively and unambiguously with the police. Policing operations should no longer be subjected to general control and direction from outside the department. The police role will have to be orientated in a manner in which service function gets precedence and the prevention and detection of crime is seen to have a social purpose. The transformation strategy should seek and solicit voluntary support and cooperation of the people.

Since the predominant purpose of the police is to enforce the laws of the land without fear or favour, it is crucial to render it neutrally. Such neutrality can be achieved by placing the police under apolitical control, thus creating a cushion between political expediency and law enforcement. In the absence of such a cushion, vested quarters will not let police do its mandated duty.

The police needs to be brought under a system of accountability that enjoys public confidence. If this is done, it is hoped, the police work ethics will start changing positively. The police organisation of the future will have to evolve shared vision and understanding of a common mission that focuses on meeting the community expectations. We need an institutional framework that will ensure an operationally neutral, organisationally autonomous, and functionally specialised and institutionally accountable service oriented policing in Bangladesh.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Secretary and IGP.

OPINION

Promoting tourism in SAARC countries

ABU IMRAN

THE tourism ministers of SAARC countries met in Cox's Bazar recently. The meeting was inaugurated by a person no less than the prime minister of Bangladesh herself. It speaks of the importance of promotion of tourism in SAARC countries. Thanks are due to the Pakistan tourism minister Ms Nilofar Bakhtiar who was understood to have proposed a relaxed visa regime. She also observed that though there was around 5.5 per cent growth in world tourism, the

number of tourists from Bangladesh to Pakistan in a year was as poor as around 6000 persons. It is far less as compared to India which, according to an estimate, is nearly a quarter million annually.

Now let's see why the number is so poor for Pakistan and rich for India. In the first place India is a next door neighbour. It is a big country with huge resources and opportunities for the world tourists. People go there for visit, treatment, education and many other purposes. Journey to India is much cheaper and easier. It has been

made easier by the opening up of land routes serviced by direct buses. Further, visa is very liberal.

Against the above, a visit to Pakistan is almost an ordeal. The first hurdle is the restricted issuance of visa which the Federal Minister had hinted will be liberalised. The High Commission here follows the policy of generally saying no to a visa seeker. A typical test case may explain.

One Abdul Hamid made his way into the Pakistan High Commission premises to get a visa since he has relations in Pakistan. On the first day, he was told that his forms were

not properly filled in although there were no major mistakes. Then he was told to come after a week. That man was from up north. He faced considerable inconvenience in boarding and lodging for a week as he was poor. A week passed and the designated day came. He was hopeful. He saw the official concerned. The responsible person instead of issuing a visa gave him a printed chit with the telephone and fax number of the Interior Ministry in Islamabad to get a clearance from there to enable him to issue the visa. It came as bolt from the blue for him since the ordeal he

faced for a week went in vain and it seemed almost impossible for him to get a clearance from Pakistan as he knew nobody in Islamabad. With a broken heart he returned and narrated the sad story of seeking a Pakistani visa.

The other notable problem is the very high cost of passage money. The only route open is transportation by air. It now costs around Tk 36,000/- for a person to travel by air, apart from the incidental costs. Bangladesh is poor country with around less than US\$400 per capita income. That being so the people in general cannot afford the

luxury of travel to Pakistan. Yes, they can if the travel cost is reduced.

In the above circumstances, if the leadership is really sincere to foster trade and tourism in SAARC countries in general, and between Bangladesh and Pakistan in particular, then the following steps, as also hinted by the Pakistani Federal Tourism Minister, may be helpful:

(1) Liberalise visa restrictions in the real sense, no reference to Pakistan. The authorities in the Pakistan High Commission here should be competent enough to

issue visa to genuine passport holders.

(2) Reduce the airfare by introducing domestic rates in the SAARC countries.

(3) Open up new travel routes between Bangladesh and Pakistan. Rail route via India may also be reduced meaningfully. The improved relationship between India and Pakistan, the two nuclear rivals, is a point in reference. The same would happen in the case of Bangladesh and Pakistan if identical measures are taken.

travel, trade etc. will substantially pick up momentum, bilaterally and regionally. More inter-action among the peoples will help develop people to people contact and, thereby, regional tension will also be reduced meaningfully. The improved relationship between India and Pakistan, the two nuclear rivals, is a point in reference. The same would happen in the case of Bangladesh and Pakistan if identical measures are taken.

Abu Imran is a retired govt official.