

## A thought in the right direction

*Opposition veering away from hartal, siege?*

**W**E are happy to learn that the Opposition may be seriously considering a change in its agitational strategy. Apparently, the thought was triggered by the spontaneous response it received from the public during its five-day street marches that also ended peacefully without any untoward incident. Their earlier programmes of hartals did not meet with similar success.

Already, the frequency of hartals has been noticeably lessened. We now also hope that we shall no longer see 'sieges', too. We are also happy to see that no less than the leader of the opposition has instructed her senior party colleagues to find out suitable ways to attract greater and spontaneous participation of the people at large in the rallies.

Needless to say, we have seen in the past how both hartals and sieges disrupted the day to day lives of the people in addition to causing serious clashes between the activists and the law enforcing agencies including loss of public and private properties. On occasions there has been loss of lives, too.

We wholeheartedly welcome this positive thinking on the part of the opposition and sincerely hope that this will now serve as a trendsetter for all our political parties and politicians from here onwards.

As the election draws nearer, we are bound to see more and more street programmes and campaign processions by both the opposition and the ruling coalition so that the importance of peaceful marches can hardly be over-emphasised.

Let good sense prevail and peace and tranquillity rule supreme in our civic lives.

## Uproot them with full force

*JMB operatives still active*

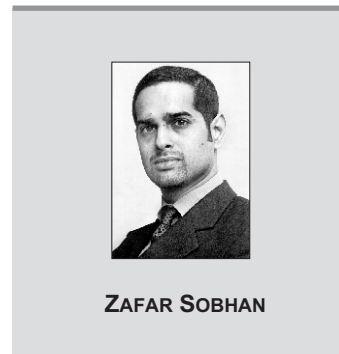
**W**HEN everyone thought that the last of the JMB operatives had been netted and done away with, the news of the arrest of 26 more along with the most wanted leader came as a surprise and also as welcome relief. In an astute move, a contingent of Rab outfoxed the group undergoing training in a remote camp in the depths of woods in Mymensingh. It was a huge haul no doubt and the credit must be given to the elite force, which seems to be relentlessly on close pursuit of the outlaws.

The very fact that the group has been receiving training on bomb making and waging war despite having their top leaders facing death sentence, speaks a great deal about the steam that they still have to continue with their anti-state activities. The composure with which they faced the members of the law enforcing agency indicates how strongly committed they are on fulfilling the goal of destabilising the country in order to implement their own skewed agenda. The unbending attitude very rightly raises questions about the source of their funds, strength and ideological support.

The leader of the outfit, one Mufti Abdur Rouf, is reported to be an Afghan War veteran and a diehard JMB activist having received training in Pakistan and maintaining connections with some Arakan rebel groups. We are appalled to learn that this highly dangerous anti-state person was arrested by the law enforcers twice before, first time in 1995 and second, in 2003, but both times he was set free on bail. This fact not only demolishes our confidence in the way police charge-sheet works in the county, it also points finger at the loop-holes in the laws of the land, that create opportunity for top criminals to slip away.

We believe the arrest of the new bunch of JMB operatives and unearthing of the secret training camp in Mymensingh go to show only the tip of the iceberg. There is every possibility that many more such camps exist in the country and the law enforcing agencies have their jobs cut out. They will have to trace and clamp down on them. The nation wants to see every single JMB ring leader and field level operative appear before the court of law, and justice done to them.

## BNP plays its joker



ZAFAR SOBHAN

**T**HE drama continues. Like the monster in a 1950s B-grade horror movie, just when you think he has finally been dispatched for good, ex-president HM Ershad once again rises from the dead to confound his critics and show that there is some life left in his political career yet.

This time, the life-line has been offered to the ex-president by BNP joint secretary general and son of the prime minister, Tareque Rahman, who together with his crony, the state minister for home affairs, Lutfuzzaman Babar, brokered the deal to bring Ershad into the ruling alliance ahead of the upcoming elections.

On the surface, the overture towards the ex-president would seem to make good political sense. Ershad's Jatiya Party accounted for 7.5 per cent of the popular vote and 14 seats in parliament in the 2001 elections, and claims a significant presence in up to 50 constituencies, predominantly in the greater Rangpur area.

Well, clearly not. The second reason is that the move smacks of opportunism. This is almost unfair to the BNP since it implies that the AL-led opposition would under no circumstances have made a similar deal with Ershad, and that this is indeed the case is far from certain.

## STRAIGHT TALK

**The fact that the Jamaat emerges as the biggest loser from the addition of the JP to the alliance is significant. Not only will the JP eat into the Jamaat seat allocation, the addition of the JP may also serve to diminish Jamaat influence over the alliance. The question to now consider is whether the BNP reaching out to Ershad portends a rift between the Jamaat and BNP that might lead to the Jamaat leaving the alliance.**

However, a closer look would suggest that bringing Ershad into the fold might ultimately back-fire on the ruling alliance and hurt more than it helps.

The first reason to think this is that, any way you slice it up, reaching out to the discredited ex-president smacks of desperation and suggests that the ruling alliance is seriously concerned about its sinking popularity.

In 2001, the BNP by itself won 193 seats (216 with the rest of the alliance) and the alliance was able to garner 47 per cent of the popular vote. In the run-up to the upcoming elections, the BNP has long claimed that it was in a commanding position and that it was confident of returning to power in a repeat landslide.

Well, clearly not. The second reason is that the move smacks of opportunism. This is almost unfair to the BNP since it implies that the AL-led opposition would under no circumstances have made a similar deal with Ershad, and that this is indeed the case is far from certain.

Nevertheless, whether the AL would have acted in a similarly opportunistic manner is only conjecture. It is hard fact that the BNP has done so, and the AL will emerge enhanced in the public mind and the BNP diminished due to this.

Of course, the opprobrium that will attach to the BNP in direct proportion to how much Ershad is ultimately able to demand to keep him in the fold. So far, the quoted price of the dropping of the 16 cases against him, 50 seats to contest for the JP, and the presidency, seems pretty steep, and is unlikely to do the BNP much good.

The next point to consider is whether adding the JP will upset the dynamics of the existing coalition. In fact, no need for conjecture here: it already has. No sooner had the details of the deal hit the headlines, than the Jamaat-e-Islami went on record as being unhappy with the deal. As well it might.

The Jamaat had been hoping for allocation of between 50 and 60 seats (it received 30 in 2001, out of

which it won 17) for the upcoming election, but if Ershad demands 50 seats to bring the JP into the alliance, then this will eat into the Jamaat share, as there is no way the BNP can part with some 100 seats.

The Jamaat is especially disenchanted with the JP deal as it had had high hopes of making inroads into JP strongholds in the north of the country where it believes that it is the stronger of the two parties.

In fact, bringing the JP into the fold is likely to throw the already fractious ruling alliance even further into disarray. There is now a good chance that in whatever seat the BNP allocates to an alliance partner there will be two rebel candidates, the overlooked BNP candidate and one from either the Jamaat or the JP.

If the anti-AL vote is split three ways, then this could spell disaster for the BNP-led alliance. The 14-party alliance would have perhaps preferred for the JP to remain independent and thus split the anti-AL vote, but the way things stand now, there is every chance

that the anti-AL vote will remain fractured.

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Such a move might be very well received outside the country. The US had for years identified the Jamaat as a "moderate Muslim" party that it wished to reach out to and cultivate, and its diplomats lost no opportunity to laud and lionize the party.

However, the recent evidence of links between the Jamaat and the more extremist elements within the Islamist movement in Bangladesh might have finally inclined actors such as the US to conclude that this is a party it can no longer do business with, hence the need for the BNP to disengage from it. The problem for the BNP then becomes how to replace the Jamaat votes that brought it to power in 2001. Enter the ex-president.

However, to my mind, the most suspect element of the deal from the point of view of the BNP is the fact that the JP, which only has localized support in pockets of the

country, cannot really hope to be a long-term replacement for the Jamaat, which has support in more or less all 300 constituencies, and provided the margin of the 4-party alliance victory in scores of seats in 2001.

Of course, it is not a done deal. Either side could still back out. However, even if the deal is ultimately not consummated, it is possible that the BNP has done itself some very real electoral damage due to the now indelible perception that it is prepared to do anything to win.

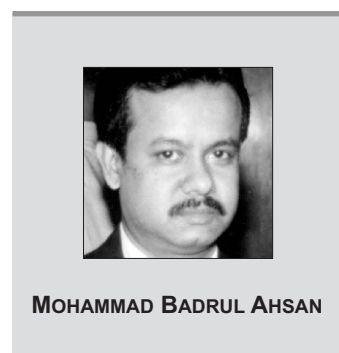
The final question to consider is whether this slap in the face of the Jamaat signals a division in the BNP between the prime minister, who has long been opposed to Ershad and is known to be close to the Jamaat leadership, and her son, with the inference that the Ershad deal indicates that Tareque is gaining ascendancy.

To me the most interesting aspect of the deal is the fact that it was brokered by Tareque Rahman and that it is so clearly harmful to the interests of the Jamaat. Perhaps what we are seeing is the first step in a long-term BNP strategy to side-line the Jamaat and that this effort signals that Tareque Rahman is beginning to make his move.

Where it will all end is anyone's guess. But stay tuned, the action is only starting.

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## From Bible to Beirut



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**I**F you think of the war in Lebanon as a movie, the plot is taken straight from the Bible. The Palestinian Arabs complain that they have been expelled from their homeland by the Jews. But the Jews claim that Palestine is their ancestral homeland given by God to the descendants of Abraham through Isaac. The Big Powers who support Israel believe that after the inquisition, the pogroms and the holocaust, the world owes the Jews a homeland, and that homeland may as well be in Palestine.

That homeland might as well have been in Argentina had the Zionist Congress not changed its decision of 1904. The decision to seek a homeland in Palestine came in 1906 when less than 10 per cent of the population of Palestine was Jewish. We are not talking about a history lesson here. Take it as a warning. Rights, possession,

## CROSS TALK

**That homeland might as well have been in Argentina had the Zionist Congress not changed its decision of 1904. The decision to seek a homeland in Palestine came in 1906 when less than 10 per cent of the population of Palestine was Jewish. We are not talking about a history lesson here. Take it as a warning. Rights, possession, inheritance and ownership are not relevant any more. Might makes it right to take your land or your home.**

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But then the Arabs asked for what they got. During World War I, Britain promised the independence of Arab lands under Ottoman rule, including Palestine, in return for their support against Turkey, which had taken side with Germany. In 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration and promised the Jewish people an independent Jewish state in Palestine. By then it was too late for the Arabs to know that they had been short-changed.

Lawrence Auster lays bare the historical facts in the Front Magazine that Israel has never taken land from the Palestinians and the Palestinians have no claim over Judea, Samaria (the West Bank) or Gaza. His argument resonates the views of most people in Israel and the friends of Israel who stand by it

actions. As a strictly legal matter, the Jews took the land from the British, who exercised sovereign authority in Palestine under a League of Nation's mandate for thirty years prior to Israel's declaration of independence in 1948. The British don't want their land back. So who are the Arabs to ask for it?

The same argument goes on. If the British are considered illegitimate usurpers, then the land goes back to the Turks because Palestine was a province of the Ottoman Empire for hundreds of years. The Turks are not asking for their land either. Going back further in time until 1517, the land belonged to the Mamluks, who don't even exist to ask for their land.

The Mamluks had taken the land from the Ayubbi dynasty in 1250, who took it from the European Christian Crusaders in 1099, who took it from the Seljuk Turks, who took it from the Abbasid Caliphate in 750. In

661 the Ummayyad Caliphate inherited the control of Islamic lands from the Arabs of Arabia who had conquered Palestine in 638 from the Byzantines, who inherited from the Romans, who had taken it over from the last Jewish king in 39 BC. Before that Palestine was owned by the Hellenic Greeks, who took it from the Persian Empire, who took it from the Babylonian Empire, who took it from the Jews after they had taken it from the Canaanites who lived there for thousands of years.

The convoluted history leads us to the stark realities of a dog-eat-dog world. Despite many change of hands any powerful person or state can claim right of ownership on behalf of their ancestors. Under the rule of law it happens in the courtrooms based on deeds and documents that could establish one's right of ownership, possession or inheritance.

But ownership of countries is

sorted out by military conquest. The Arabs gained Palestine through military conquest. The Jews gained some of it back through their own conquest in 1948 and subsequent wars. This is the time-honoured way of establishing sovereignty throughout human history. Almost every government today owes its existence to someone in the past that conquered its territory by war or revolution.

If you scratch the surface of civilization, it is seething underneath with conquests, violence, subjugation, cruelty and hatred. The world still remains silent to the fate of the Tibetan people who had quietly inhabited their land until it was seized by communist China in 1950. The argument is often marshaled against the Arabs that in the early Middle Ages they had conquered and reduced to slavery and penury ancient peoples and civilizations stretching from the borders of Persia to the Atlantic.

Perhaps the Jews have an IOU from God to get Palestine as their homeland. Perhaps some Jews were always living in Palestine since the early days. But Israel is where it is mainly by dint of might, supported by the US, which itself is founded on conquered land that belonged to the American Indians. The other supporter is the original sinner which handed the land to the Jews in the first place. It proba-

bly did not bother the UK, because once it had conquered half the world to build an empire where the sun never set.

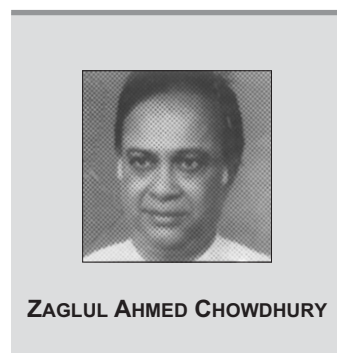
Wars work like diseases, when it is important to diagnose the root cause before applying medicine. Israel sits like a thorn in the side of Arab pride, which is evident in anger boiling on the Arab streets. The Jewish claim on Israel as their homeland is based on a Biblical promise. A section of Christians in Texas has referred to the Book of Revelation, saying that the war in Lebanon is the sign of Armageddon, the final conflict between good and evil when Jesus Christ shall return to earth and bring thousand years of peace. But the world must understand that what is Biblical game to others is death to the Lebanese people.

Palestine belongs to Israel if the United States goes back to the American Indians, if Australia goes back to the aborigines and the UK returns to the Visigoths. For that matter India should go back to the Aryans or the Dravidians. Bangladesh belongs to the descendants of the Bodo aborigines wherever they are living today.

Yo Blair, ask Mr. Bush how much he knows about history. Turn off the microphone. You may not have a decent conversation.

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## South Asia badly affected by the Lebanon crisis



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

**T**HE escalating hostilities in Lebanon is definitely the most serious international crisis now threatening international peace and stability, and what is more disturbing is that no indication is in sight for a cessation of the fighting.

Many countries, ranging from the world's only super power, United States, to the small neighbours of Lebanon, clearly have direct, or indirect, stakes in the entire scenario. Undeniably, some have major interests, and the crisis is certainly revolving around such interests, defying even a temporary settlement, or truce, even though an overwhelming

## MATTERS AROUND US

**South Asia is also bearing the brunt of this crisis, and leaders of these countries need to make a more vociferous demand for immediate cessation of hostilities, and the return of normalcy to Lebanon, as soon as possible, which, however, appears to be a Herculean task. Such a call could have come strongly from the just concluded conference of the Saarc foreign ministers, although the issue has an international dimension. After all, the region is suffering otherwise as a fall**

majority of nations across the globe is against the fighting that is taking a huge toll of lives, along with causing colossal destruction.

Still, fighting is continuing for the simple reason that Israel, which has launched an all out invasion by air, land and even sea, is in no mood to slacken its offensive against the relatively much weaker opponent. And the stark reality is that Tel Aviv is turning a blind eye to the unremitting calls for ceasefire because it knows that the US is behind Israel.

Indeed, it is least expected in a world where almost every day one is used to hearing about

noble principles governing peace and tranquility, human rights, democracy, and dignity of mankind. Nevertheless, the belligerence is becoming sharper with the passing of every day, leaving a trail of devastation of grave magnitude.

South Asia does not have any major stake in the crisis as such, politically, but all are appalled by the shape of things in Lebanon and the military offensive. Clearly, the crisis has mainly two dimensions -- political and humanitarian. Even if the former has relatively less relevance in this region, the latter has affected South Asia

adversely to the extent that it is bearing the brunt of the Lebanon crisis in a big way, much to the shock and dismay of the regional countries.

In fact, in a larger perspective, South Asia, along with several nations in South-East Asia, have been badly affected economically and socially. The people who had gone to Lebanon in big numbers in quest of a livelihood are returning home to save their lives. Several hundred Bangladeshis have already come back in difficult conditions. So is the case with Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and Nepal.

The Philippines, and other

nations, are also in the same category. Many people of these countries, driven by extreme desperation, are unwilling to return home even in the face of direct danger to their lives. It is because economic condition is important for them. "What would I do when go back home since I have to maintain my family with the income from here?" asks a Filipina expatriate in Lebanon, refusing to return home although she risks her life and faces uncertainty about her job. Still, she finds little rationale to leave Lebanon. Certainly her feeling echoes the feelings of most Asian expatriates there.

A Bangladeshi returnee is not happy that he had to come back because, he says, he had gone there hardly a few months ago spending a large amount of money and had to return even before earning back that amount. "Why such a misfortune has befallen me?" he ruefully exclaims.

The humanitarian aspect of the crisis is really alarming. Lebanon is bleeding, and the

woes of the people of that unfortunate country know no bounds. The latest tragedy involving the country, and in a larger perspective the entire Middle East, was triggered by the Israeli military assault in southern Lebanon, which has continued for more than three weeks.

Tel Aviv says that it is after the " Hizbollah" which captured two of its soldiers and was demanding the swap of many prisoners in Israel in exchange for the two captives.

Earlier, one soldier was kidnapped in Palestine and Tel Aviv responded mercilessly to the development when it captured several key figures of the Palestine authority, including ministers and law makers.

Skirmishes and the capturing of soldiers, or militants, from either side is nothing uncommon in the Middle East which has been an international flashpoint for several decades. But the response by Israel to both the kidnapping incidents surpassed all estimation to the extent that even the Western

nations, usually shy of criticising Tel Aviv, also described the reactions, particularly the all out Israeli invasion of Lebanon as "highly disproportionate."

It has been a like a full blown war, with the army, air force and navy pressed into massive aggression, leading to colossal devastation of Lebanon. The aerial bombardment, that did not exclude an important infrastructure like the Beirut international airport, caused huge destruction, and there has been no let up in the intensity. Of late, the massacre in Qana which killed a large number of innocent people, including women and children, led to a sharpening of the international outcry, but no truce is in sight.

Undeniably, political issues are seemingly intractable and often take time for a settlement, let alone a crisis of enormous gravity like the middle east. Efforts normally cannot find a solution to such imbroglios, but humanitarian issues often draw international concern cutting across the political, and other,

divides.

Unfortunately, in Lebanon, the conditions which would deter Tel Aviv from carrying out the offensive, affecting mainly the innocent people, have not so far taken any shape despite the fact that there has been a near-orchestrated expression of concern, and anxiety, in the world about the human tragedy.

South Asia is also bearing the brunt of this crisis, and leaders of these countries need to make a more vociferous demand for immediate cessation of hostilities, and the return of normalcy to Lebanon, as soon as possible, which, however, appears to be a Herculean task.

Such a call could have come strongly from the just concluded conference of the Saarc foreign ministers, although the issue has an international dimension. After all, the region is suffering otherwise as a fall out of the Lebanon crisis, and this is costing South Asia heavily.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.