

More extremists in drag-net

They need to be rooted out

THE arrest of seven members of an Islamic militant group called Hizbut Tawhid by the Chittagong metropolitan police is a fresh reminder of the presence of ideologically-charged fanatic religious groups in the country. The police have certainly done a commendable job. There is no alternative to an all-out approach when it comes to dealing with such militant groups purportedly aiming at armed revolution to establish Islamic rule.

The crackdown on the Hizbut Tawhid activists follows the operations against similar outfits in the recent times which led to the arrest of a number of Islamic radicals. Now, there is no way of dismissing such groups lightly, given the nature and magnitude of their campaign. The Hizbut Tawhid is reported to have spread its network to more than 60 districts with around 30,000 activists. If that is true it is really indicative of the organisation expanding itself in a planned way without our knowing it much. We should not be caught unawares by such developments.

The arrests have also made it plain that quite a few organisations have sprung up in the country with the sole agenda of destabilising society. Interestingly enough, these organisations have their own interpretation of religion and militancy; and their modus operandi includes feats of violent, frenzied action. So, it is obvious that the task of eliminating the threat of religious militancy is far more complex than was generally thought in the past. Clearly, the law enforcers will have to operate on several fronts.

One noticeable aspect of the fight against the militants is that the presence of any group is usually overlooked until it resorts to violence or extreme measures. However, a more sensible and effective course of action would be to monitor their recruitment and training procedures, sources of funds etc. and counter them forcefully.

The point of worry is that the Islamic militants seem to be regrouping in different shape or form under the banner of this or that party. We must not forget that they are trying to attain the same goal through following more or less the same path. So their plan must be thwarted well before they can cause any damage.

New jail code

Not a day to waste

THAT a jail code of the British era, precisely dating back to 1864, is still operational, with minor changes over time, is an affront to our sensibilities as members of a civilised society. It has the smack of a colonial vintage subjugating mentality of treating prisoners, many of them still to be convicted, as lesser human beings, something like barbarians. Furthermore, it is a testimony to our warped sense of priorities with the prisoners customarily stigmatised as something of pariahs.

In this overall context, it's heartening to note that a jail code reform is in the offing, expected to be implemented in a matter of month or two. The new provisions will give a human face to the treatment of prisoners. These will do away with back-breaking work for them and introduce such practices as freeing inmates on parole, entertainment for prisoners, simplification of the division facility and removal of discrimination in the allocation of foods.

Needless to say that in our sardine-packed jails most prisoners live in subhuman conditions in terms of basic amenities -- starting from toilet facilities through minimum nutrition intake to sleeping space, they manage to live an animal-like existence.

But there is an underworld to the prison houses where drugs are peddled and good foods and luxurious living are bought off through palm greasing at appropriate points. It's a mini crime world that operates giving a lie to the jail's role as something of a reformatory.

Mere upgrading of facilities by itself cannot bring about the desired transformation in the living conditions inside the prison houses. It's common knowledge that under-trial prisoners outnumber the convicts. So long as the trial proceedings are not quickened through appropriate law reform interventions and enhancement of policemen's prosecution capacity, our jails will remain overcrowded and with that the ordeals of the prisoners will only grow, no matter what attempt is made to reduce their hardship.

A test case for the 'new Middle East'



M ABDUL HAFIZ

CONTRARY to the conventional notion of war -- that at least two combatant states are involved in it -- in Lebanon only one state has been unleashing its military might against a non-state entity, a "terrorist" outfit as Hizbollah is routinely described by Israel and its patrons. Lebanon, on whose territory this war is being waged by Israel with unprecedented fury, is yet to join the fray but has already taken most of its brunt.

Another strange phenomenon of the conflict is the highly dubious role of the only superpower, claiming to be the referee not only in this case but everything concerning the Middle East, now undergoing a transformation in a new mould to fit seamlessly into

its agenda to dominate the region without any opposition.

Ms Condoleezza Rice, while talking to the Lebanese prime minister recently, made no bones about her country's intentions and bluntly dismissed Lebanon's pleas for an immediate ceasefire. She insisted that what the US is looking for is to work for the evolution of a durable "new Middle East." Lebanon is apparently a test case of what shape and contour that Middle East of liking to the US and Israel should look like to the power brokers in Washington and Tel Aviv.

Since the end of the Second World War, when commercial exploitation and marketing of oil became the principal US interest in the region, Washington has

PERSPECTIVES

For cosmetic diplomacy, the US is falling back on the tried and failed method of energising its trusted allies such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, all beset with actual and potential threat by Hamas and Hizbollah-like grass-roots movements in their own domain, to help rein in Hizbollah in Lebanon. But there are signs that Hizbollah will so easily be cowed. Rather the Arab world is finding its new hero in Sheikh Nasrullah, the Hizbollah leader in Lebanon.

relentlessly tilted at all windmills to ensure the political forces in the region are not arranged against its monopoly of the region's oil. Israel was precisely created as the West's strategic outpost to keep a strict watch on the region's political developments vis-a-vis its oil wealth.

The shock of the 1973 oil embargo spearheaded by a patriotic King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and for which he was soon made to pay with his life factored in another ploy of the US policy for the region. That was and still is to divide the Arab world and especially atomise any country likely to threaten fortress Israel.

The neo-con strategists have succeeded by and large in taking care of the "troublesomes"

amongst the Arab countries. Egypt, the most powerful among the Arab countries, was cherry-picked when it was induced to sign unilateral peace with Israel -- thus eliminating a major slinger that could bother Israel.

Then, with the elimination of Saddam Hussein from Iraq, the last country potentially capable of encumbering Israel's rise to the position of a regional bully has been effectively dealt with. That leaves only Syria -- with its wings already clipped -- in the Arab world. Iran, a non-Arab country with the stigma of Bush's Axis of Evil label is routinely denounced along with Syria as the backer of Hizbollah.

While Washington may have succeeded in browbeating the

Arab states not to challenge the rising tide of Israel's power, non-state entities such as Hamas, Hizbollah and Moqtada al-Sadr's outfit in Iraq have not only filled the vacuum of opposition to Israel, but have become powerful enough in their own right.

These entities have become enormously popular because of the grass-roots support cultivated by them on the strength of their social welfare programs. The Arab street is enthralled by the array of the services rendered by the likes of Hizbollah and Hamas that stand out in marked contrast to the contempt shown by the corrupt Arab regimes for their deprived underclass. That is why Hamas and Hizbollah continue to grow to the consternation of their enemies in the US and Israel.

The "new Middle East" Ms Rice is hawking with such fanfare remains only in US and Israeli blueprints for a region cleansed of all popular resistance movements. That would consist only of Arab regimes -- a motley collection of monarchies, autocracies, and sham democracies.

The "new Middle East" of US-Israeli vision has no room in it for

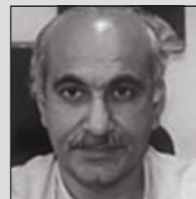
a genuine democracy such as Hamas, which is entitled to run the Palestinian government on the basis of its overwhelming popular mandate. The US would rather prefer the government to be run by the discredited but pliable PLO in its place.

Lebanon is being pulverised with ruthlessness not seen since the razing of Dresden during the Second World War to sow the fear of Israel in the hearts of Arab rulers and warn them that their countries could likewise be shredded if they do not deal with their popular resistance movements on the guidelines suggested by Tel Aviv and Washington.

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Big (red) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Lost plot



M J AKBAR

SO five years after 9/11 are we back to the beginning? Not quite. Complexity has been replaced by simplicity, but the magnitude of ambition remains steadfast. However, there are subtle changes in the big story, and fresh curves in the small ones: the diameter has changed, there is more than one centre in this circle, and the spokes spreading from these centres to the edge have multiplied. One size does not fit all.

The good news I presume is that the plot to blow up ten aircraft over the Atlantic was preempted. The police had to move on suspicion and information from the shadows of an uncertain world, so there is a natural degree of scepticism in the absence of hard evidence. But those entrusted with our security need the benefit of doubt.

We hear that the famed British intelligence picked up the first signals as early as last December. It was a long wait, but they surely had their reasons. They had a mole from within the British Muslim community, and they received much better intelligence from Pakistan. During the G-8 conference in St. Petersburg, George Bush went out of his way to praise General Pervez Musharraf for help in the Bush-Blair war on terror. Did this information travel from Islamabad to London around that time?

BYLINE

Bush still jumps from one inappropriate phrase to another, unable to see the damage he causes in the process. When claiming the obligatory victory against terrorists who had failed to carry out the "liquid hijacking," he blamed it on "Islamic fascists." I wish someone would tell him that there is nothing Islamic about fascism. Some Muslims are indeed fascists. I could name a few who survived on American cash and goodwill. Why blame Islam for the sins of a few Muslims?

The focus is again on Pakistan, but that is a known, familiar and legitimate focus for any spotlight. The real worry for Tony Blair should be at home.

Five years ago, he, along with Bush, bombed Afghanistan to destroy the perpetrators of 9/11. This time, almost all the suspects are British-born. Why? What has happened that has alienated British Muslims from Blair? What is Blair going to do now? You can't bomb the suburbs of London, can you?

Bush and Blair are good at winning a war on the ground. They are experts at losing the battle for the mind. Their firepower is impressive. Their persuasive power is abysmal. There is no mystery in this. No one really believes what they say, because they have made a habit of shifting the truth to define their objectives, or shifting the objective when facts have changed.

Armed action always finds support when it is perceived to be just, which is why there was so much support for the war that ended the Taliban government in Kabul. But five years later, the limitations of even a just war are also obvious. Bush and Blair went to war to find Osama bin Laden. If the Taliban had handed Osama over for trial, the ostensible reason for war would have disappeared. Five years of power later, Bush and Blair still cannot

find Osama. Osama bin Laden can find any television channel he wants, when he chooses to send a videotape message. Any journalist from a television channel can get in touch with his group. Those videos do not travel from Pakistan to Qatar on a flying carpet, do they? But the combined might of CIA, MI6 and Pakistan's ISI cannot find Osama.

The true consequences of the unjust war that Bush and Blair perpetrated, in Iraq, are being measured in slow, painful, bloody, deadly steps. War is a difficult business; occupation of necessity will turn brutal when soldiers come under pressure or succumb to the worst form of temptation, as in cases of rape and consequent murder. Bush and Blair may tabulate death with the cold eye of a statistician. Young men in anonymous streets might react differently. Blair invites so much scepticism that many young Muslims in Britain simply disbelieve that there was a "liquid plot" and that this is another effort to exploit insecurity for political gain. They do not keep such thoughts to themselves anymore. They tell CNN.

Bush has a worse problem. The Democrats in America did not waste much time before wondering whether the timing of the plot disclosure had a political dimension.

Five years down a difficult line,

there are too many questions, wherever one looks. A favourite phrase of America and Britain five years ago was narco-terrorism. Terrorists were using the wealth from Afghanistan's poppy crop to finance their evil. It is sometimes dangerous to lose as effective an alibi as the Taliban. In the five years of Bush-Blair management, Afghanistan's poppy cultivation has reached a record high. This narcotic is not meant for Afghans, or it would fetch a very devalued price. Its true value comes from the euros and pounds and dollars it fetches in Europe and America. Those are the currencies that keep farmers in Afghanistan happy, and the criminals who run the drug trade in comfort. Have you ever wondered why not a single supply line of drugs from Afghanistan to the West is ever busted by the military forces stationed in Afghanistan? I may have missed the news, but have you ever heard of smugglers being caught and punished?

Failure is terrible, and terribly contagious as well. It wreaks havoc on both foe and friend. High on their own agenda, Bush and Blair blithely ignored one of the real causes of international conflict, and thought that an occasional verbal morsel thrown towards Palestine would see them through their terms in office. They contorted the logic of their own favourite moral horizon, democ-

cracy, when free elections brought into power a force they did not want. There was more than one way to deal with Hamas. They chose obstinacy. When you have blindsided yourself, reality becomes invisible.

Their policy towards Palestine was at least partly rooted in contempt for the Arab, born out of the conviction that the Arab could never fight, and even if he did, was no match for Israel. Bush and Blair had absolutely no idea of the forces that they had revived, or given birth to. In five years, Arab governments may have remained their usual static self, but the Arab street has become a different place.

There was a virtual smile on the faces of Bush and Blair in the first week of the Lebanon war, when with characteristic smugness they rushed weaponry to Tel Aviv and gave Israel "time" to finish the job (that is, eliminate Hezbollah) before they defined the terms of a ceasefire. A month later, Israeli tanks lie disabled before shocked cameras. A small paramilitary force of irregulars without a single tank, battleship or airplane, with rockets that were widely dismissed as defunct, has held its own against the fabled might of the Israeli Defence Force. Time has stripped away the disinformation that all sides use during war. For instance, Israel accuses the Hezbollah day in and day out of hiding behind civilians in order to justify the awful destruction of a nation, but no one tells you that Israeli military installations are in civilian areas in north Israel.

At the moment of writing it is unclear how the war will pause (it will not end, it will only pause). But this much is clear. The myth of Israeli invincibility lies buried in the hills of Lebanon. The body language, as well as language, of Shimon Peres, a veteran of every war that Israel has fought, has changed in 30 days. The last

statement that I heard him make on CNN had more fizzle than fizz: "We did not start this war, so we don't have to win it. We have to stop it."

When was the last time that Israel's media were demanding the resignation of their prime minister in the middle of war? There was no last time. This is the first time. The days when an Israeli general could stroll into Beirut, conduct operations at will, and stroll back are over. The cost of even trying to stroll towards the Litani river has been very heavy.

Problems cannot be solved unless they are first understood. Bush and Blair now give the impression that their sole purpose is to stretch whatever remains of their credibility to last till they have to leave office. They need the enemy they set out to destroy, or the logic of their survival will collapse.

Bush still jumps from one inappropriate phrase to another, unable to see the damage he causes in the process. When claiming the obligatory victory against terrorists who had failed to carry out the "liquid hijacking," he blamed it on "Islamic fascists." I wish someone would tell him that there is nothing Islamic about fascism. Some Muslims are indeed fascists. I could name a few who survived on American cash and goodwill. Why blame Islam for the sins of a few Muslims? Bush and Blair are believing Christians who go to church as often as they can. Does anyone in his senses describe their wars as "Christian wars"?

The sadness is that 9/11 was a historic opportunity to find answers in a spirit of collective sorrow. Instead, all we see is the debris of unanswered questions. Bush and Blair perhaps believe that they can survive on the strength of media headlines. Today's headlines are so often tomorrow's boomerangs. Bush and Blair have lost the plot.

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Of eminent citizens and so-called patriots

BY THE NUMBERS

It is really unfortunate that most eminent citizens of the country including economists and newspaper editors are frequently facing defamation suits filed by the high-ups of the ruling alliance, no matter whether they are really liable for defamation or not. It clearly testifies to the vulnerability of the citizens' fundamental right to express one's own opinion, though our constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and speech to every citizen.

Laila Rahman Kabir. The court issued arrest warrants against the five on August 9 following a defamation case filed by the executive chairman of Board of Investment (BoI). The complainant alleged that the accused had organized a press conference at CPD offices on August 8 where they made derogatory statements against him which were published in the next day's newspapers.

The court order came amid a war of words between the BoI and CPD in the past few days over the actual position of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the country during the last few years. CPD held a press conference after the BoI chief had made some foul

remarks about it while addressing a meeting of the Economic Reporters Forum at the National Press Club on August 6.

The BoI chief branded the CPD as "a conspirator and a shameless liar." He also accused the think-tank of maligning Bangladesh's image outside by disseminating distorted information. He termed CDP executive director Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya as "kulangar" (black sheep) on another occasion.

A lot of criticism one may have about an organization and that has to be done in a polite manner. But the manner in which the BoI chief expressed his personal invective against the CDP was

an exposure of his lowest ebb. He has not only humiliated himself but also the institution he represents.

The BoI chief has shown another degree of the filthiness of his mind through lodging a criminal defamation case against five most eminent citizens with considerable national and international repute. The repeatedly replayed TV footage has confirmed to the nation that the five who are now facing warrant of arrest, did not make any defamatory comments against the BoI chief, rather it was the BoI chief who made quite a few defamatory remarks against CPD and its executive director.

It is pertinent to call into question the role of the metropolitan

magistrate who issued the warrant of arrest so expeditiously instead of issuing summons and without being satisfied whether the defendants are really liable for defamation or not. One wonders what prompted the magistrate to apprehend that these eminent citizens would not respect the court's summons to explain themselves. It reminds us once again how urgent is the separation of judiciary from the executive branch of the government.

The arrogant attitude shown by the BoI chief did not have the minimum decency. He was behaving as if he owns the country as he said: "By defaming me, they have defamed the country." The Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam very rightly compared such attitude with the French Emperor Louis XIV. The BoI chief also said that the CPD executive director has lost the right to Bangladesh citizenship. Surely he is not the man to decide who can or cannot be a citizen of Bangladesh.

It is a particular malady for the nation that some people in power always foster an attitude that patriotism is only of their monopoly. This may sound odd, but reveals the stark truth about our so-called patriots who hardly miss any

opportunity to malign the journalists, economists and researchers for smearing the image of the country abroad and questioning their patriotism. We will only let the BoI chief know that no one, not even an advisor to the government, has a monopoly on patriotism.

The LGRD minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan threatened to take legal actions against TIB for labeling his ministry as the most corrupt. Rejecting the report at a press conference, he said, the TIB report was a bundle of wrong notions which was prepared with an ulterior motive to portray the country as a dysfunctional and failed state.

Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed, the chairman of the TIB trustee board, took a strong stance in the event of the adverse reaction of the LGRD minister and said TIB is ready to face the LGRD ministry legally if and when it files suit against TIB for publication of its corruption database. But finally the LGRD minister beat a retreat.

TIB, as one of 85 accredited national chapters of the Transparency International across the world, works at national level to raise awareness about the damaging effects of corruption, advocates policy reform and to increase

levels of accountability and transparency. It began its activities as a trust in 1996 and since then has been working as a catalyst of social movement against corruption and for promoting good governance in Bangladesh.

On the other hand, CPD is engaged in economic research and monitoring of state expenditure as watchdog. These two institutions TIB and CPD have kept our hopes alive by bringing to light many unfair social, political and economic situations in the country.

According to the LDC Report 2006 of UNCTAD, Bangladesh could not do well in five sectors including FDI inflow per capita. Bangladesh stood 9th among the 50 LDCs regarding FDI inflow, which is lower than average rate. Angola, a poor African country received \$2 billion FDI during the year 2004 while Bangladesh received only \$460 million. It is a truth that the BoI chief can not really deny. His claim that country's economy is boosting due to FDI is not borne out by facts.

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defamation or not. It clearly testifies to the vulnerability of the citizens' fundamental right to express one's own opinion, though our constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and speech to every citizen.

In view of the present situation, it is urgently felt that proper law should be enacted for protection of the eminent citizens from such harassment. The members of the civil society and professional groups must raise their voices louder in support of enacting such laws. Meanwhile the government should take steps to make Mahmudur Rahman tender an unconditional apology to the five and as well as to the nation for his foolhardiness.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.



ANM NURUL HAQUE

NO language is strong enough to condemn the shocking development that led to the filing of a criminal case involving five of the most eminent citizens of the country. The magistrate of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (CMM) Court of Dhaka, in an unprecedented incident in the country, issued warrants of arrest against the chairman of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and eminent economist Professor Rehman Sobhan, executive director of CPD Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, CPD trustee board members -- former advisor to the caretaker government Syed Manzur Elahi, former finance minister M Syeduzzaman, and former president of the MCCI