

The poet is no more

We mourn with the entire nation

WE are deeply saddened by the death of Poet Shamsur Rahman. As in living so in dying, he braved his illness to the last ounce of his strength.

He was by all counts the most revered and popular poet of Bangladesh. He was also a poet who was equally respected in West Bengal. Shamsur Rahman was a poet of varied talent and enchanting versatility.

He was a poet who was highly conscious of the socio-political environment of the times, an expression of which we can find in his innumerable poems. Starting with the language movement through the vicious alien attempts at imposition on our cultural values to the freedom struggle he powerfully wielded his imaginative and visionary pen inspiring the people of the country to reach new heights of intensity in commitment and devotion to all that is Bengali, all that is our own. He was a conscientious objector to anything that went against our pristine ethos.

The forces of reaction and obscurantism unleashed attack on him. He faced up to their machinations bravely with characteristic firmness and stoicism.

Shamsur Rahman's poems also reflect the traditions, trials, tribulations, joys and sentiments of Bangladesh's rural populace. As much as he was a poet of romance and urbanity, he was also a poet who was deeply committed to upholding human dignity. His poems were equally appealing to both the young and the old.

Shamsur Rahman was a man of quiet dignity and charm, a poet whom the more you knew the more you came to admire and adore. He was a down to earth man, humble and totally unpretentious. On a personal level, he was a courageous man. He braved a number of debilitating ailments towards the last several years of his life and yet continued with his mission undaunted.

Poets may come and poets may go but we might not see the likes of late Shamsur Rahman in this country again. Poet Shamsur Rahman left us at a time when the nation is passing through one of its critical phases of existence and needed him most to inspire us with his works.

We express our deepest sympathies with the bereaved family and hope they will have the fortitude to bear up with the loss. Let the nation pay a befitting homage to this great poet. May his soul rest in peace.

Industrial zoning idea

It can be a magnetiser of investment

MBUED with the success of export processing zones (EPZs) but at the same time being well aware of the limits to their vertical expansion, the government has decided in principle to set up investment zones in the country.

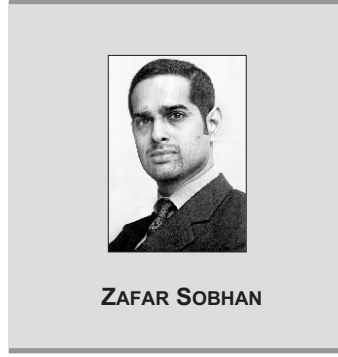
Just to measure the success of EPZs in the last five years, exports from them increased by 86 percent to reach US\$702 crore compared with US\$377 crore over the preceding half a decade. Investment in EPZ over the past five years increased by 81.54 percent with 67,825 Bangladeshis in their employ.

The Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) in its last meeting of the Board of Governors has approved its organogram, rather belatedly, we have to say. But most significantly, it has given a green signal for 'security outsourcing in EPZs, expansion of Comilla EPZ, bringing 184-acre land of Chittagong Steel Mills under Kamaphuli EPZ, installation of underground water network in Chittagong EPZ, setting up of a container terminal on the Shitalakhya river beside Adamjee EPZ and construction of two hospitals in Dhaka and Chittagong EPZs.'

While evidently fresh efforts are getting underway for the growth, beefing up and advancement of the export processing zones, there is a palpable farsighted realisation that vertical expansion of EPZs can reach an inelastic point today or tomorrow. With that end in view, the Board of Governors of BEPZA in their eagerness to break new grounds have embraced the idea of establishing investment zones which obviously struck a responsive chord in the BoL. The investment zones will differ from the EPZs in that the latter has the fiscal incentive like ten years' tax holiday while the former will have the whole array of non-fiscal incentives alright but not the tax holiday. The taxes will accrue to the government. On the other hand, the products of the investment zones would be marketed both locally and internationally whereas goods from EPZs are only for the export market.

The big hope for the investment zones emanate from the enormous growth of private domestic entrepreneurship that the country has been blessed with lately. All that they need is a secure place to set up an industry free from any land acquisition hassle, utility connections, a good hinterland, marketing network and communication facilities. The industrial zones can provide backward linkages to the export industries in the EPZs. We would like such zones to be the hubs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The concept can also be linked to the tertiary growth centres.

What war on terror?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

AMERICAN journalist Selig Harrison's August 2 piece in the Washington Post titled: 'Bangladesh: A New Hub of Terror?' has generated the by now predictably distressing response from the intelligentsia and cognoscenti in Bangladesh and the increasingly influential non-resident Bangladeshi community.

The issue for the chattering classes, as ever, is not the rise of fundamentalism and extremism in Bangladesh and the current government's culpability with respect to this phenomenon. No, the issue is the besmirching of Bangladesh's image and the danger inherent in Bangladesh being identified as a haven for Islamist terror.

This response has provided a pretty good demonstration of how our own fight against fundamentalism and extremism has been complicated and rendered exponentially more difficult by the Bush administration's war on terror and the inclination to try to understand our own protracted

struggle within this context.

Bush's war on terror has had the signal (and, one might argue, single) consequence of enhancing the popularity of Islamic fundamentalists all over the world. The perception that the war on terror can more accurately be understood as a war against Islam has done more to bring thoughtful and concerned Muslims over to the world view of the fundamentalists than the decades of fundamentalist propaganda and preaching that preceded it.

Indeed, if Bush's misguided war continues, and unless his Republican party is dealt a severe rebuke in Congressional elections this November there is every reason to believe that it will, then we may soon approach a critical mass of Muslims worldwide concluding that the only appropriate response to such aggression and expansionism is the fundamentalist one.

But the popular corollary here to concerns about Bush's war on terror, which is that to raise the issue of terrorism in Bangladesh

STRAIGHT TALK

This is not to say that US expansionism does not need to be resisted, only that Bangladesh is not the Middle East and that here in Bangladesh the more pressing immediate concern is to roll back the assault on minority rights and women's rights and freedom of thought and conscience and religion that have been permitted to flourish these last five years.

is to somehow play into Bush's hands or to legitimize US aggression in its name, is misplaced.

The war on terror neither validates the fundamentalist instinct in the Muslim world nor should it blind us to our own very real problems with fundamentalism and obscurantism.

In other words, looking at the problems of fundamentalism and extremism in Bangladesh through the prism of the geopolitics of Bush's war on terror is profoundly unhelpful, and in fact, counter-productive.

This attempt to frame the issue of fundamentalism and extremism in Bangladesh within some kind of global context serves only to strengthen the hand of our local Islamists and to provide them cover for their mission of bringing Bangladesh under their narrow and reactionary interpretation of Islamic rule.

Most dangerously, attempting to shoe-horn Bangladesh into the global narrative of the war on terror permits Bangladeshi Islamists to align themselves in

the public mind with the bona fide resistance to American expansionism of groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah and to don their mantle of warriors against of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism.

In truth, there is no meaningful commonality at all between groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, who are resisting oppression and occupation, and our home-grown fundamentalists who are instruments of oppression and who, if they came to power, would institute the virtual re-colonization of the country by their masters in Riyadh and Islamabad (or, perhaps, the mountains of South Waziristan).

Make no mistake about it, this framing of the issue of terrorism in Bangladesh within the context of the war on terror, and the argument that by raising the issue of terrorism one is helping to facilitate intervention and an attack on Bangladeshi sovereignty, is a stratagem of the fundamentalists and their "useful idiots" among the progressive

intelligentsia.

Look, I sympathize with the people of Iraq and Palestine and Lebanon. I admire the resistance of groups such as Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army and Hamas and Hezbollah, and understand that in the context of the conflagration in the Middle East that they are the parties most worthy of my respect and support.

But that does not mean that my thinking with respect to Bangladesh should be distorted by the depredations of the US in the Middle East or that I need to throw in my lot with fundamentalists here in Bangladesh.

This is not to say that US expansionism does not need to be resisted, only that Bangladesh is not the Middle East and that here in Bangladesh the more pressing immediate concern is to roll back the assault on minority rights and women's rights and freedom of thought and conscience and religion that have been permitted to flourish these last five years.

And let me add that for all its rhetoric of the war on terror, the Bush administration has done nothing to help Bangladesh in our own struggle against extremism and obscurantism, in fact, quite the opposite.

In fact, as far as US policy with respect to Bangladesh is concerned, there is no war on terror at all. As has been the case elsewhere as well (see, e.g.,

Pakistan), the Bush administration has found it difficult to adjust to the reality that groups and individuals the US has funded and sponsored for decades and who were loyal allies during the Cold War are now the enemy. As a result, the US has been worse than useless when it comes to helping us in our own fight against fundamentalism, obscurantism, and extremism.

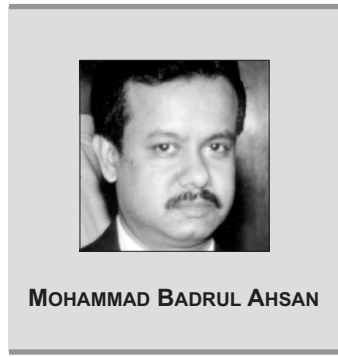
This is why we are treated to the spectacle of the last US ambassador acting as apologist-in-chief for the Jamaat-e-Islami and the continuation of the thoroughly misguided Bush administration policy of reaching out to fundamentalists and obscurantists in Bangladesh.

The "progressives" tell us that to raise the issue of terrorism in Bangladesh is to provide cover to the Bush administration's war on terror and to invite intervention and loss of sovereignty. They don't get it. The last thing that the Bush administration cares about is stamping out terror in Bangladesh.

Anyone who thinks that Selig Harrison's August 2 piece will incline the Bush administration to take a closer look at Bangladesh or to seek to crack down on Islamist terror here has seriously misunderstood the Bush administration's imperatives with respect to Bangladesh.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Three saints of damnation



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

GEORGE W. Bush, Tony Blair and, now, Ehud Olmert are out there to do what 124,000 prophets, countless messiahs, hordes of saints and many jolly good men failed to do before them. They are out there to get the bad guys, those who are crazy enough to blow up airplanes, buildings and even their own bodies in order to threaten democracy and terrorize the world. The triumvirate of virtue has a mission in mind. They are going to wipe out the Hezbollah in Lebanon, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the nuke maniacs in Iran and the Al Qaeda network in its many hideouts. They will cleanse the world of evil and terror to make it a safe place again.

Hence, we saw the recent foot dragging by the United States and the United Kingdom when Israel pounded Lebanon for more than a month. The big powers showed the feigned air of exasperated elders who like to wait until a child gets sufficiently



CROSS TALK

No comparison but interesting facts. Every time some people threatened to wipe out others, terror was born. The Austro-Hungarians threatened to wipe out the Serbs, leading to the First World War. In the Second World War, the Nazis wanted to wipe out the Jews. Now a coalition of three nations has set out to wipe out the bad guys in Islam. It will not happen, because one cannot cleanse the world of evil if one harbours evil in one's own mind. That is what the three saints of salvation are going to learn, perhaps after few more wars, more bloodshed and loss of many more lives.

thrashed to remember not to start a fight.

That is where the mission of those three great men has faltered. Not to say, it was not the first time. The mission was already faltering in Iraq, a country once held together by a ruthless dictator, now torn by zealot benefactors with too much love. And before you wonder who was trying to blow up 10 transatlantic airplanes, you wonder why Al Qaeda was still around when George Bush had sworn to destroy it way back in 2001?

The fact is that it would have been a wonderful mission only if it worked. George Bush announced last Thursday that his country is at war with the Islamic fascists. He said the same thing one month short of five years ago, only this time he was careful not to use the word crusade in his speech. But has that war got worse or better since it started?

Actually, the more relevant question is where is this war going? The gyre of confrontation is widening with the gyre of retribution, dragging more countries into the crisis since it started on 9/11. Richard Holbrooke, a former US ambassador to the UN, recently expressed his concern in The Washington Post, listing 14 countries, which are getting sucked into the crisis. He then cautioned that if this situation continued, the Third World War was inevitable.

Others are talking about historical facts. The First World War started when the Serbian nationalists assassinated an Austro-Hungarian archduke. The Austro-Hungarians threatened to wipe out the Serbian nationalists, which provoked the pan-Slavic nationalists, who were working for the Russian czar. When they threatened to destroy the Austro-Hungarian Empire if

the Serbs were touched, Germany's Kaiser pledged to take retaliatory actions. France, which had an anti-German alliance with Russia, refused to sit on its hands.

That is how wars spread amongst nations like a neighborhood fracas, when two women arguing in the queue for tap water, drag their husbands, brothers, sons, close relatives and well wishers into the fight. People take sides in these fights like nations take sides in wars unless a crisis is nipped in the bud. In five years since the Twin Tower bombings, the centrifugal force of terror has expanded, while the popular sentiments across the world, particularly in the Arab streets, have heightened against the United States.

So, what does it matter if explosives change from solid state to liquid, while passengers are being increasingly squeezed to take fewer things in their

carry-on luggage? Now there will be naked scanners which will even show your private parts! But the real explosives exist in a gaseous state, hidden in the fumes rising from the boiling blood of those who are being oppressed.

Seymour Hersh of The New Yorker magazine, who exposed Mai Lai massacre in Vietnam and Abu Ghraib atrocities in Iraq, described a scenario of that oppression on CNN last Sunday. He claimed that the Israeli attack on Lebanon was planned even before the Hezbollah kidnapped the Israeli soldiers on July 12. The US air force was closely working with the Israeli air force for months in preparation for an attack on Iran.

Seymour explained that the United States wanted to wait until Israel had substantially destroyed the missiles which were in Hezbollah's possession. It was for this reason that the White House was not keen to support the ceasefire in Lebanon. Then he suggested that it was something that really should be examined by a Congressional committee, and that it was time to see if the United States was a democracy or not, since the president was doing an awful lot of foreign policy without sharing it with the American people.

That leads to the question about the real intentions of the three saintly men. George Bush

lied about WMD so that he could justify the invasion of Iraq, and Tony boy was on his side all that time. George Bush looked for an excuse to attack Iran and both Tony and Olmert have run his errands. As lies have upon lies, where is the truth behind 9/11?

It may sound a little wonky, but the real cause of terrorism lies in the dark mysteries of those lies. That is why the cease-fire in Lebanon feels like an uneasy calm before the next storm. The war in Iraq will only get worse, Israel will face renewed threats from Hezbollah and Hamas, and the United States will itch to lead a strike on Iran. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda is going to look for new ways to sneak explosives into airports and airplanes.

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Nomination candidates for election: Tough task for major parties

Right nomination of candidate is always important for any elected government. In case of an alliance, finding the right candidate is all the more critical. True democratic parties do not face much difficulty, but if the ultimate choice depends on the whim of the party chief there may remain greater danger of committing mistakes in choosing the right candidate. Thus both these major parties may have to be cautious and careful to gain maximum positive result from their selections for their own benefit and the nation.

AMB S ZAHUR

BY October 2006 the tenure of the present parliament will be over. This national election (scheduled to be held in January 2007), as we know, is crucial for the future of our emerging democracy because the nation: (i) Takes a decision as to whether religion should be the dominant factor in politics, (ii) Decides about the political future of the anti-liberation forces in the country, (iii) Decides in regard to the equation to be made in its relation with Islamic and non-Islamic countries, its future policy on secularism in politics, its attitude toward using muscle power in politics. Unfortunately, despite honest and sincere efforts made by the

non-party intelligentsia, eminent business men and our prominent donors, our major political parties (AL and BNP) have not yet shown any real indication for holding discussions on smoothening out of their differences to ensure a free, fair and effective election.

While BNP-led alliance emphasise only on accurate voter list for holding free and fair election the AL-led alliance refuse to participate in the election without reform of EC and CTG. Meanwhile the enigmatic and wayward chief election commissioner and the two election commissioners appears to be going ahead with their plan to hold the election though they know fully well that a very large number of voters will not accept any election under the present election

commission.

The BNP, however, considers the present work of EC quite acceptable (though some of the prominent leaders (ministers) of BNP regard EC's work as not very acceptable). This prompts one to conclude that the CEC may have been appointed to assist the alliance government to do every thing needed for so-called election engineering. If the ruling alliance think that with the help of a controversial voter list (which includes a large number of fake names), intimidation of minority voters and ordinary voters of opposition parties, driving out the election agents of opposition parties from the polling booth and by counting of votes by the politicised returning officers miracles can be achieved

apart from this police atrocities on journalists, unprecedented corruption, extraordinary price hike of essential commodities, unparalleled terrorist activities by the Jamaat-e-Mujahideen members

in the election they are to tally wrong.

Why they do not realise that though the people of Bangladesh may not be as mature as the Indians, they are at least intelligent enough to understand about the various tricks applied by the candidates during the election. They certainly understand which candidate in their constituency is honest, sincere, dedicated and capable. A few may, however, be lured by money but majority cannot be purchased.

The NDA (led by BJP) of India under the very capable leadership of Vajpayee lost the election mainly because of bad handling of communal matters by the NDA government. During the last four and a half years the minorities in Bangladesh never felt good or secured because of a number of incidents of attacks on them by the BNP terrorists (in some cases supported by influential BNP leaders).

They have realised now the necessity for becoming less dependent on their alliance partners. Because of their inadequate political experience and maturity and no experience of running an alliance government, naturally enough, the more experienced and disciplined pro-Islami parties (particularly JJ) could extract greater benefit and the burden of bad names (because of mistakes and omissions) has to be borne by

and unsatisfactory handling of readymade garments workers' grievances will certainly affect adversely BNP's performance in the next election. On the other hand the image of the other partners of the alliance government has been tarnished by the reported allegation against them that they have link with both domestic and foreign terrorist groups and their anti-liberation activities such as attacks on intellectuals believing in secularisation of politics.

Overwhelmed by their unquenchable thirst for power BNP failed (in 2001) to think clearly about the implication of faulty nomination and alliance with the fundamentalist anti-liberation parties.

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BNP alone.

Consensus is that there should be free, fair and effective national election. However, result will only be truly acceptable if the opposition parties participate in the election. In the present situation successful election will only be possible if the following actions can be taken:

- a) A fresh accurate (as far as possible) voters' list under a new and reasonably acceptable CEC and ECs;
- b) Reform of election commission to make it more powerful and totally free from the control of PMO;
- c) Reform of the CTG to make the chief advisor really effective enough to conduct a free and fair election;
- d) The anti-corruption commission (ACC) must be made effective to scrutinise the antecedents of the candidates contesting the election;
- e) The police authorities must ensure that the candidates are in no way (directly or indirectly) involved in any terrorist activities;
- f) The candidates must not be tax evaders, involved in any anti-social activities, or loan defaulters.

In a highly corrupt under-

developed country like Bangladesh it is really hard to find out true honest, dedicated and capable candidates in adequate numbers. Apart from this, the major parties like BNP and AL have other serious and sensitive problems like maintaining balance between the senior and junior leaders, between the field level choice and the choice of the central leaders, allocation of seats among the alliance partners. Apparently these problems are less acute in the AL. However, complaints are often heard about too much of dominance of old guards in AL camp. It is time that AL high command seriously considers encouraging the new generation to handle greater responsibilities.

Nomination of right candidates needs careful scrutiny and good political judgement. Both the major parties appear to be well aware of the problems. It is to be seen how far the high commands of the parties can keep themselves free from the influence of money.

At present the political scenario of Bangladesh is charged with uncertainties because of lack of understanding and cooperation among political parties. Without

bothering much about the intricacies of nomination of candidates both the parties appears to be busy in finding ways in capturing power, or for consolidation of its power, to enjoy the wealth it has amassed during the last four and a half years and the other for maintaining its political existence in Bangladesh. Both the parties are so desperate for power that they do not hesitate to show interest in a fallen dictator put behind bars on charges of corruption, tax evasion and misuse of power.

Right nomination of candidate is always important for any elected government. In case of an alliance, finding the right candidate is all the more critical. True democratic parties do not face much difficulty, but if the ultimate choice depends on the whim of the party chief there may remain greater danger of committing mistakes in choosing the right candidate. Thus both these major parties may have to be cautious and careful to gain maximum positive result from their selections for their own benefit and the nation.

AMB S Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.