

Such a large number cannot be left out

Fill in the gaps in the voter list

THE field level exercise of updating the voter list has ended, and there are reports that the enumerators have not visited all the households. Having wasted nine months in disregarding the High Court order on the mechanism of updating the voter list, the EC now tells us that about five percent of the eligible voters have not been included in the updated list. Are we to take this as a fait accompli?

This is a matter of concern for several reasons. First, it threatens to disenfranchise a large number of eligible voters. Secondly, for the EC to suggest that it will be up to those who have not caught the enumerators' attention to present themselves to the respective election commission offices for enrolling, is abdication of the EC's constitutional obligation, which is to ensure that all eligible voters are registered by visiting every single household in the country in the first place, and not for the eligible voters to ensure that they are enrolled.

The other issue that causes concern is the mechanism of determining the percentage of voters left out. We wonder what is the statistical basis for the EC to suggest that five percent remain unregistered.

Furthermore, given that the total number of voters registered is over nine crores, five percent makes nearly a mammoth half a crore voters. One wonders how the EC will ensure that the un-enrolled are included in the list, given that it will allow no further time for the field support staff to go from house to house to do so. And the decision on the part of the EC not to display the list for the voters beyond three days risks exclusion of eligible voters. It was mandatory, according to the rules, that the draft electoral roll was put on display for at least 15 days.

We find the comments of the EC secretary, that the list has been completed to the satisfaction of the political parties, rather amusing. It is not really the satisfaction of anybody that should be the criterion for determining whether a given task has been properly done, but to ensure that it is done as per proper procedures and without any lacunae by the one performing the task.

We feel that the task has not been done fully or properly. The shortcomings must be put right for the sake of a credible election by timely inclusion in the voter list of all those left out of it.

Militant outfit creeping back in?

Need for greater vigil

THE report that the members of the banned militant outfit, Harkatul Jihad al Islami, organised a rally in the city on Friday, under the banner of a new party, is certainly a cause for concern.

The government, however, has claimed that it is not aware of any such development. That is, of course, all the more reason for us to feel worried. Even the state minister for home affairs said that he had learnt about the rally from newspaper reports.

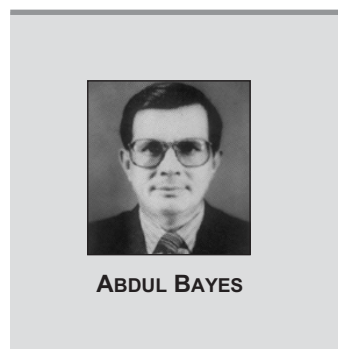
We believe the issue of Islamic militants staging a comeback is not apparently being treated with seriousness. There are some points that must be considered before the issue can be placed in the right perspective. The Islamic militants adopted a threatening posture and made their presence felt by launching some violent attacks on their perceived enemies. The situation reached a point where the government had to make some very determined efforts to counter the threat. The campaign against the militants led to some of their leaders being arrested from different parts of the country.

A mood of complacency set in, as the law enforcers continued their forays into the militant hideouts. But why should they believe that the worst is over and that the militants would never try to reorganise themselves? A brief survey of such militancy across the globe would instantly reveal that the fanatic groups have great resilience and are hard to knock off.

The law enforcement agencies have been instructed to remain alert and ready to foil any subversive activities. However, they cannot possibly succeed in their mission if any well-known militant leader can still hold a rally in the capital city. Is the government showing the same indifference that actually allowed the militant outfits the time to gain strength in the past?

The reported comeback of Harkatul has to be viewed as a sign of the militants regrouping themselves. And the law enforcers have to take the same tough course to subdue them as they did while launching an all-out drive against such groups.

Who tills the land?



ABDUL BAYES

THAT a large proportion of the rural labour force (almost all agricultural) is "missing" from the land is, possibly, not new news. I recall that the data, or information, on "missing agricultural labour" in rural Bangladesh at household level was first disclosed by Dr Mahabub Hossain (IRRI) from a data base that he developed from 67 villages, between 1988-2000.

In the conventional context, leaving agricultural labour is seen as a sign of laudable economic progress. Agricultural labour is the poorest segment in the rural society and comprises, mostly, the functionally landless and marginal farm households. Hence, the sooner they can get out of low-wage agriculture the better it is for their economic survival.

But such numbers "missing" from agricultural labour market is not always welcome. If labour is "pushed out" of agriculture, it is termed as bad or as a sign of stagnation. If labour is "pulled in" by other sectors because of a better wage deal, it is dubbed as good and as a sign of security.

Both, "push" and "pull" factors continue to haunt economists in

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The proportion of male workers used in crop farming between 1988 and 2000 is reported to have significantly declined (45 per cent vs. 39 per cent). But by 2004, the share shot up to 42 per cent -- almost to the base level. At disaggregated level, only the employed male workers from the functionally landless group seem to have increased their share in crop farming: from about 13 per cent in 1988 to about 28 per cent in 2004. Whereas, the other groups registered a declining share in crop farming. In other words, it is only the functionally and marginal land owner groups that are increasingly turning to crop farming for their economic survival.

their search for an answer to the missing labour issue. Hossain's seminal study, however, showed that in rural Bangladesh the non-agricultural sector "pulled in" labour from agriculture. Economic progress over the years possibly paved the way for the "missing" labour to enhance both mobility and malleability across occupations.

Thus, while farming and other agricultural activities, albeit lamentably, lost ground over the periods under review, the eye-catching deviations could be observed in the case of agricultural labour serving as a source of employment. As said before, they come from a very poor economic base in rural areas. The share of agricultural labour force almost halved between 1988 and 2004 -- both as primary and secondary sources of occupation.

Further, a lion's share of the "missing" agricultural labour found ways to serve as non-agricultural labour and, thus, found better living through higher non-agricultural wages.

For example, in 1988, only 8 per cent of the labour force was

engaged in working in construction, transport, industrial, and other non-agricultural pursuits. By 2000, the share shot up to about 19 per cent. However, as recent data tends to reveal, the share of labour force engaged in non-agricultural activities, including business (but excluding services), registered a decline in 2004. The dropped out labour force might have found a way to farming in 2004 to raise its share of labour force employed (hence of agriculture) to about 53 per cent from about 52 per cent in 2000.

But for the female labour force, the opposite seems to have happened: from barely 4 per cent in 1988, the share of female agricultural labour rose to 15 per cent in 2004. The void created by the outflow of the male labour force might have partly been filled in by the female force. Pushed out by pervasive poverty, about 16 per cent of the rural female labour force once took up construction work as a source of survival in the past. But by 2004, the share dropped to 8 per cent. Similarly, business no more attracts females as it used to do

before. Now a part of them have tilted to the transport sector also.

The proportion of male workers used in crop farming between 1988 and 2000 is reported to have significantly declined (45 per cent vs. 39 per cent). But by 2004, the share shot up to 42 per cent -- almost to the base level. At disaggregated level, only the employed male workers from the functionally landless group seem to have increased their share in crop farming: from about 13 per cent in 1988 to about 28 per cent in 2004. Whereas, the other groups registered a declining share in crop farming. In other words, it is only the functionally and marginal land owner groups that are increasingly turning to crop farming for their economic survival. But how?

A part of the explanation comes from the tenancy market. The proportion of rented land in rural Bangladesh -- as shown by the data -- rose from 23 per cent in 1988 to about 33 per cent in 2000, and further to about 40 per cent in 2004. Thus, the cultivated land left by the large and middle land owners is

being rented out and is mostly managed by the poor land owners. But mere availability of land would not, perhaps, lure them unless conditions of contract are also changed.

Share cropping -- allegedly an age-old, inefficient, and exploitative tenancy arrangement with 50:50 output shares -- accounted for about three-fourths of the total rented-in land in 1988. Fixed rent and mortgage-in system accommodated 23 and 5 per cent, respectively. By 2000, however, the share of share-cropping arrangements dropped to about 64 per cent allowing fixed rent and mortgage-in system to raise the shares to about 21 and 16 per cent, respectively. In 2004, share cropping claimed about 60 per cent of all rented-in land. Fixed rent system accounted for 24 and mortgage 19 per cent. All the developments show that tenurial arrangements have undergone tremendous changes and, possibly, the changes went to attract the poor farmers to crop farming.

The dynamics appear to be clear. Once upon a time, agriculture pushed labour out of land based activities, like crop farming, owing to its incapacity to hold them with subsistence wages. We are talking about the pre-green revolution era when aus season (dry season) claimed almost half of all cultivated land. The green revolution sent aus season almost to oblivion by down-sizing its share in total cultivated area to 15 per cent in 2000 and 12 per cent in 2004. Even amam season witnessed a wane in its share of cultivated area. Boro seasons, with HYV package, marked its march from 47 per cent of cultivated area

in 1988 to 75 per cent in 2004.

Meantime, infrastructural developments took place. Markets got integrated. Non-farm activities increased to lure labour with higher wages. The "missing" labor -- pulled in by non-farm sector -- pushed up the agricultural wages in the farm sector. Large and medium land owners found it hard to continue cultivation with such higher wages. Thus, those who served as agricultural labour in the past (functionally landless and marginal groups) entered into the scene as "land owners." Since they can somehow bear the costs of inputs or better alternatives wait for them in non-farm sector, they bargain for fixed-rent system or mortgage-in system. In some places, the land owners are running after tenants to request them to till their lands. The "missing" labour is now returning to the land.

Agriculture in general, and crop sector in particular, will have to be patronized by the government in most cost-effective fashions in the years to come. The bulk of the population now engaged in agriculture is functionally landless, agricultural labour, and marginal farm groups. From an egalitarian perspective, the state has to see that policies do not go against them; distortions do not result in efficient allocation of resources. In other words, more emphasis should be placed on agriculture now than before as the poor now hold the promise.

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Has al-Qaeda landed in India?

Over-reacting to terror



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

TEN thousand policemen just to secure the Red Fort. Delhi air traffic closed for the entire day -- in aid of a morning ceremony. Curfew-like "sanitisation" of scores of cities. Intensive searches that inconvenience lakhs of people.

Never before has India witnessed such security on Independence Day. The arrangements were disproportionate to threats and based on a naive "more-is-better" assumption. The public was asked to accept harassment for long periods -- not to avert a perceptible, imminent threat, but a vague, generalised, ethereal one.

The authorities seemed to want to create a "barbed-wire" mentality and a climate of anxiety and fear.

Three factors explain the security excesses. First, after the Mumbai bombings, which took the intelligence agencies by surprise -- and whose perpetrators and motives they have failed to identify -- they were anxious not to be caught napping again. This led the National Security Adviser to press

the alert (panic?) button.

Second, after the uncovering of a "plot" to blow up 10 airliners between London and the United States, there were heightened fears that groups like al-Qaeda might launch another attack. South Asia might be targeted because a majority of the suspects were of Pakistani origin and a Jet Airways employee was involved.

The US embassy in India said it anticipated that foreign terrorists, possibly al-Qaeda, might conduct attacks "in, or around, New Delhi and Mumbai." It shared this intelligence with the Indian government, which immediately imposed the same kind of baggage restrictions on air travellers as in London -- despite the different threats.

The next day, the US state department contradicted the embassy and said its warning must be understood as "hypothetical," not "definitive." But India's security establishment ignored this and further tightened security. It had already made up its mind, regardless of the facts.

This highlights the third factor: namely, National Security Adviser

M.K. Narayanan's strange new assessment that terrorist group Lashkar-e-Tayyeba has recently joined al-Qaeda, making India a target of "global terrorism," no less.

If true, this would doubtless mark a qualitative change. But reaching that conclusion demands incontrovertible, weighty, clinching evidence. Mr Narayanan hasn't produced an iota of this.

This violates all criteria of transparency and is utterly irresponsible. There's a compelling public-interest reason why the nation should be told of the basis of this assessment. Instead of hard evidence presented through proper official briefings, all we have is one person's statement, unsupported by facts -- plus unverified, unsourced, planted media reports. These claim that the "authorities" have obtained "intercepts" of wireless calls between terrorists; in Kashmir, they sighted "tall men speaking an alien language."

Some stories refer to "definite reports" that al-Qaeda has joined hands with groups like LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahideen. One paper says a "30-

member al-Qaeda module is on the prowl in south Kashmir."

However, wireless "intercepts" have often proved unreliable. They are only as good as their interpretation. The sight of "tall men" speaking a foreign-sounding language in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual state like Kashmir isn't all that unusual.

Some militant groups, cited as al-Qaeda's collaborators, are at loggerheads: e.g., LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Hizbul Mujahideen, largely composed of "indigenous" Kashmiris, regards both as "outsiders."

Given all this, it's positively irresponsible to tom-tom al-Qaeda's arrival in India. This serves three deplorable purposes. First, al-Qaeda's name evokes a super-human, Satanic, invincible force. Even the mighty US couldn't defend itself against al-Qaeda. How can India?

This becomes an excuse for inaction and incompetence on the part of India's intelligence agencies, and a reason for evading the duty to unearth and analyse evidence.

Second, exaggerating terrorist

threats leads to panic and fear. Such a climate facilitates draconian anti-terrorist laws, like Tada and Pota, favoured by trigger-happy policemen. But the more the state brutalises innocents, generating resentment, the higher the appeal of revenge-based ideologies -- and the terrorist threat.

Third, the al-Qaeda bogey promotes all kinds of imaginary links between groups driven by local grievances (e.g. Hizbul Mujahedeen) and those inspired by fundamentalist ideologies. This narrows the range of anti-terrorist options.

That's what President Bush has done by inventing a preposterous new term, "Islamic fascism," and lumping together Palestinian nationalists, the Iraq resistance, Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda!

Duplicating Mr Bush's blunder will have communal effects in India. It will give "anti-terrorist" legitimacy to Hindutva. With or without evidence, various organisations from SIMI to the Muslim Personal Law Board to sundry madrasas will be declared "linked to al-Qaeda" -- with horrifying consequences.

Mr Narayanan is playing with fire. His record inspires little confidence. As Intelligence Bureau chief in 1991, he lowered the threat level, and security-cover rating, for Rajiv Gandhi shortly before his assassination. He's seen to be toadying up to those in power.

Most worryingly, Mr Narayanan views terrorism through the prism of religion -- i.e., in ways open to a

communal interpretation.

Consider a speech he made shortly after September 11, 2001, to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, in Toronto. He focused on "religious terrorists, especially of the radical Islamist variety," using every stereotype in the book.

He said: "Violence for them becomes a sacramental act, a divine duty executed... Terrorism assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators are under-terred by political morality." He spoke of an "intricate" support network for these "Islamic terrorist outfits," which has recruits from "more than a score of countries."

Mr Narayanan concludes by evoking a Hindu "mantra": "In extraordinary times, we need unusual remedies -- religion not excluded. For the Hindus (the religion to which I subscribe), the 'Gayatri' is considered to be the supreme mantra. It is a purification mantra believed to create powerful vibrations. In these perilous times, may the chanting of the 'Gayatri' protect and guide us to defeat the many forces of Evil."

It would have been thoroughly objectionable for a serving Indian official to make such a speech. Narayanan had by then retired. But now that he's back in office, he owes Indians an explanation, besides an obligation to come clean on the LeT-al-Qaeda link.

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Koizumi and the saga of the shrine

CLOSEUP JAPAN

The task of improving relations with two of Japan's key Asian neighbours will now lie with whoever succeeds Koizumi next month as prime minister. The front-runner, Shinzo Abe, has already expressed strong support for the shrine visit, and he even made a secret visit to the shrine in April. But we all know politicians, at times, act differently when they are in the position of power. Should this happen with the successor of Koizumi; it would be better not only for China and South Korea, but for Japan as well.

MONZURUL HUQ

ANYONE leaving an important office after serving for a significant period is supposed to show compassion, generosity, and grace. This is what most of the people, anywhere in the world, expect from leaders they trust to be serving their interest. For Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, too, there was no exception in that universally upheld expectation.

But we also know that expectations from important politicians always vary from the position held by those who are expecting. For

Koizumi, for example, many expected that he would have shown some form of mature leadership, if not always, then at least, at the time he gets ready to leave the office.

This is particularly true with sensitive issues like his visiting a Shinto shrine in Tokyo that pays tribute to all Japanese who died in WW II, including those who were hanged, or who served prison terms, after they were found guilty of war crimes by an international tribunal that was formed following World War II.

Koizumi himself, on the other hand, might have decided that a mature leader, of true quality, in his

own understanding, was the one who always sticks to what had been said and committed earlier. During the 2001 presidential elections of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, Koizumi had pledged that if he assumed the post of prime minister he would visit the Shinto shrine on August 15, the day Japan surrendered at the end of World War II. It should be noted that, according to a long held tradition, the president of the main ruling party also assumes the post of prime minister.

But, as August 15 is also a symbolic day in many ways not only for Japan, but also for Japan's next-door neighbours like China

and South Korea, Koizumi, until his very last visit, avoided going to the shrine on that very day, though he made the visit a yearly ritual. Now, as he prepares to leave office, he might have thought that the time had come for him to show the qualities of a mature leader by sticking to what he had committed to five years ago. And he went ahead by visiting the controversial shrine on August 15.

Speaking at a press conference soon after the morning visit, Koizumi adopted a much more defiant attitude by saying that he had done so because he was convinced that those who oppose his shrine visit would, anyway, criticize him and make a great fuss about the problem.

As was expected, both China and South Korea reacted angrily to the visit, and made their displeasure plain and clear. It was the first time in 21 years that an incumbent prime minister had visited the shrine on the symbolic day. The last prime minister to do so was Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1985.

A rational question that can be asked in this context is what did Koizumi really gain by going to a

controversial shrine that honours, among others, convicted war criminals that many in China and Korea see as being the instrumental figures behind the sufferings of their people when the Imperial Japanese army moved eastward in the name of creating a Great East Asian Co-prosperity Region. Korean slave labour in Japan, the massacre of Nanjing and the creation of the puppet kingdom of Manchukuo -- all were the natural outcomes of that move of which even many in Japan too do not feel proud of.

Koizumi had all along claimed that he makes regular visits to the shrine to pray for those who had given their lives for Japan, and also to express his firm commitment not to go to war again. But the problem with Yasukuni is much deeper than what such comments might suggest. Yasukuni is primarily a religious installation, and the Japanese constitution makes the separation of religion and politics clear. Koizumi and all other Japanese leaders who cherish the desire to defy a long held position of understanding and accommo-

dating the feelings of others are also perfectly aware of this reality. That was why Koizumi was careful to avoid the religious touch when he went to the shrine on August 15.

After signing the visitors' book as "Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi," he entered the main hall of the shrine accompanied by a Shinto priest in traditional robes. But when it came to offering prayers, Koizumi did not adopt the traditional Shinto style and bowed just only once. This hide and seek game was essential to avoid a possible controversy that he might have foreseen could jeopardize further an already complicated issue.

But if he was successful in avoiding the religious controversy, the same cannot be said of the political fallout over the shrine visit. Each time Koizumi visited the shrine during the last five years, the visit triggered protests in China and South Korea. To express their displeasure the two countries suspended, with Japan, mutual visits by their respective leaders. This has, no doubt, been the greatest of all obstacles that Koizumi encountered during his tenure. He

might wonder what prompted China and South Korea to take the issue, that he considers to be Japan's internal affair, so emotionally. At the post-shrine visit press conference he even blamed outsiders for trying to intervene in a matter of his heart, and for attempting to make that a diplomatic issue.

But what Koizumi had forgotten to take into account was the fact that there are people still alive in Japan's neighboring countries who had seen their homes burned and loved ones killed in the Japanese invasion, a fact that they probably would never be able to forget. The passage of time might heal some of the wounds, but the deep scar is bound to bleed again should there be incidents bringing back the pain in their ravaged hearts.

So, for many in China and the Korean peninsula, this very personal matter of heart is what counts, and seeing the country that caused such pain trying to gloss over the past by paying blanket tributes to all the war dead, including those responsible for the crimes must have been more painful than Koizumi's feeling

irritated by what he considers unacceptable attitude of outsiders.

Thus, the drift has almost reached to the point where it is no longer possible to bring the two sides closer again. Koizumi, aware of this tragic reality, probably decided, since his time was already running out, to make a positive contribution in healing the wound. It was wiser to show to his own people that he always means what he says. Hence, keeping a commitment that he made five years ago became so important to him at the age end of his tenure.

The task of improving relations with two of Japan's key Asian neighbours will now lie with whoever succeeds Koizumi next month as prime minister. The front-runner, Shinzo Abe, has already expressed strong support for the shrine visit, and he even made a secret visit to the shrine in April. But we all know politicians, at times, act differently when they are in the position of power. Should this happen with the successor of Koizumi; it would be better not only for China and South Korea, but for Japan as well.