

Ruthlessness syndrome

We want to see an end to it

BY any previous standards, Tuesday's police beating of opposition activists was unprecedented in terms of ruthlessness that was clearly out of sync with standard police behaviour in a democracy. Dissent is an integral part of pluralistic democratic society, and the police must be conditioned to play a positive part in it rather than being a mere tool in the hands of the ruling party.

What happened centring around the opposition's planned siege of the Prime Minister's Office was outrageous and appalling, to put it mildly. The sight of lathi wielding policemen chasing, cornering and hounding out demonstrators, both men and women, was an optical nightmare. Several journalists were also manhandled in their line of duty. The police went so berserk that absolutely mindlessly like automatons they wouldn't even spare persons lying prostrate or otherwise immobilised by the first brunt of beating. In fact, persons ducking for safety or sought to be protected by human shield were even beaten more mercilessly.

They also set a negative example of beating two more lawmakers -- Mohammad Nasim and Asaduzzaman Noor -- in addition to having badly hurt Saber Hossain Chowdhury, during the previous programme.

How could the administration be so oblivious of the presence of some international observers who couldn't have carried a good impression of the untoward incidents?

There is another dimension to Tuesday's event. The police barricaded the major roads with the result that the ordinary citizens suffered great hardship in commuting from one place to another. Free public movement should not be interfered with, whether in pursuit of political programmes or the police's precautionary preparations.

From highhandedness to brutality -- it has been a quick trip made by the police. We have been urging the police top brass through this column to ensure that men under their command use such crowd control methods as have been practiced in some countries, especially Thailand, in the recent times with no unsavoury fallout.

Avoiding collision course is key to peaceful passage of any politically loaded programme. Clashes have a way of hurting not just those at the receiving end but also some of the perpetrators. Anyway, our counsel for thoughtful and restrained handling by the police has fallen on deaf ears.

On billboards

A clear set of rules needed

OVER the years there has been a marked proliferation of signboards and billboards in the city. Granted, it's a natural trend in a free market economy, but there is a flip-side to it. Many a billboard is not only blocking the natural panoramic view of the cityscape but also becoming a possible security hazard to pedestrians. Sometime back a giant billboard fell down on one of the main thoroughfares following a mild monsoon storm. Luckily none was injured.

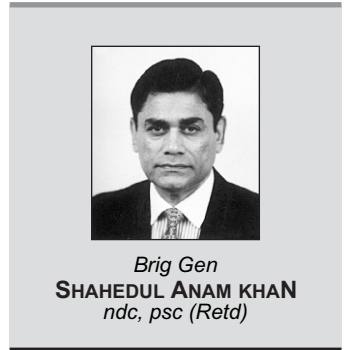
Signboards and advertising hoardings on many of the city's road islands are blocking natural sights of the recently raised mini gardens of shrubs and small sized plants. Some of the road dividers in the city are also covered with signboards in symmetrical patterns that spoil the view of the lush green vegetation.

On the other hand, billboards are erected at random on rooftops, across electric poles and all conceivable places. Some of the gigantic sized billboards stand on the roofs of multistoried buildings, often much to the displeasure of the residents of surrounding buildings since these often have powerful lighting systems operating throughout the night. There are also those with electronic devices with on and off synchronised blinking of bright light.

It is high time that this haphazard and unchecked fixing and erection of billboards be regulated. Apparently there is hardly any unified management control over the erection and display of billboards and advertising hoardings. Let's not forget, they are money-spinners. But a definitive set of rules should be put in place indicating where and how these could be erected keeping in view environmental, aesthetic, utility and safety considerations.

We keep wondering as to what happened to DCC's move sometime back in removing some unauthorised gigantic billboards?

United against terror -- are we?



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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

For Bangladesh, it is important to conform not only to the resolution but to implement the plan of action, which among other things calls for capacity building of member states in tackling terrorism in all its manifestations. Reading between the lines, one is reassured that among other things the UN has also kept in mind the need to address why the phenomenon springs up in the first place. It is very important not only to be able to identify what one is up against but also to comprehend why it has come about, in order that it can be dealt with comprehensively.

THE war against global terror initiated after 9/11 (second of its kind, the first was launched by Ronald Reagan) continues with no end in sight.

The brain behind 9/11 survives despite the US-led war to see the end to the scourge. It would not be wrong to suggest that he does so because the main protagonist in the anti-terror war has unfortunately been led more by his heart than by his head in determining the strategic priorities.

In fact, it is about time one asked whether the fight against global terrorism should all be led by the United States, particularly when the US president's focus has shifted from fight against terror to fight against "Islamic fundamentalists" and "Islamic militants."

It must not be overlooked that those Muslims who carried out the mayhem in the name of religion five years ago could not have been further from Islam while perpetrating the killing of unsuspecting and harmless people of all religion, race, and colour.

The change in focus is illustrated in the US president's 9/11 speech to his countrymen on the fifth anniversary of the tragic event. He has once again tried to justify the Iraq misadventure by saying that "the regime of Saddam Hussein was a clear threat" without really saying how.

Not surprising, either, was his lumping the two (global war on terror and invasion of Iraq) to rationalize his actions. In doing so, the message that many analysts see him delivering to the world is that global terrorism is synonymous to "Islamic terrorism." No wonder some experts suggest that the war on terror "has degenerated into a war against 'Islamic militants' and 'Islamic fundamentalism' as far as the Bush administration is concerned."

They apprehend this shift might make it more difficult for the Muslim countries to reconcile with the Bush agenda their support for a war that was supposed to transcend religious and ethnic boundaries. It appears that the Bush agenda

focusing on the Muslim militants exclusively is at a variance with the world agenda.

Also, whether the principle reliance should be on the use of raw power or military force is something that the policy makers should consider carefully, as must they ask also whether the many incidents of terrorism that one notices in various parts of the world are all linked to the terror network at the global level.

Many scholars and researchers on terrorism have highlighted the risk of laying too much of a stress on global terror and thereby overlooking the local terrorist activities. One such scholar warns us thus: "International terrorist incidents constitute only a narrowly defined component of all terrorist incidents, which, in some cases comprised all of the political violence -- taking place in that country -- so called 'pure terrorism' -- but in other cases comprised only a small component of a much larger conflict. Measuring the volume of international terrorism -- the thickness of a

thin crust a top a very deep pie -- would tell us little about the root causes of terrorism or the nature of societies that produced it."

Although spoken several years before 9/11, the major premise of Brian Jenkins, a leading terrorism expert, holds good even today.

One must not also fail to scrutinize whether the spate of bombings following the US and Western actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, have been compelled by any political motive of the perpetrators or these were reactions to those actions? Otherwise, how do we explain Australian nationals targeted in a Muslim country, Indonesia, if not for Australia's active support to Bush's post 9/11 policies and to the occupation of Iraq? We must seek rational explanations to the causes of the Madrid and London bombings too.

The Canadian foreign minister has hit the nail on the head by asserting that military power cannot by itself tackle a phenomenon that has an uncanny self-actualization mechanism, which

lends it the ability to perpetuate. The phenomenon has existed over the millenniums; it has been sustained by various ideologies in the last century, and to think that the US military power alone will be able to rid the world of it is overlooking the essence of the problem.

If military action is not the only answer, what other options do we have to ensure that the phenomenon subsides, if not the world be rid completely of it? It is important to determine the degree of sustenance or support, moral or otherwise, do the terror outfits that operate in various countries draw from the so-called international terrorist organisation, al-Qaeda.

And these are what make the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted last week by the UNGA so relevant, with one of its aims to unite the world against global terror, which we are not at the moment. These are perhaps the reasons that motivated the UN Secretary General to propound a more comprehensive strategy that would be able to address the many factors that give rise to terrorism in the first place. What he has done is exactly what various scholars on the subject suggest that we ought to focus our attention on. Through the adoption of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy by the UNGA last week it is hoped that the world will unite to fight terrorism per se as a phenomenon, without ascribing any particular shade to it.

While one accepts the reality that the adoption of the UNGA Resolution is symbolic in as much as it is non-binding, the fact that all

the 192 member states have adopted it, indicates an acknowledgement on their part, in spite of some major differences remaining unanswered, the necessity to address the matter in a holistic manner.

The three most significant aspects of the exercise, for which the secretary general and his team must be commended are: (a) the parties have been persuaded to keep the fractious issues aside in an effort to bring forth the urgency of pooling resources at the global level to tackle the scourge at all the levels; (b) the responsibility has devolved on the UN itself and not on any particular country, to lead the global fight against terror, as it should be, but which is not the case at the moment; and (c) last but not the least, emphasis has been put on the need to ensure that there is no abridgement of human rights in tackling terrorism.

For Bangladesh, it is important to conform not only to the resolution but to implement the plan of action, which among other things calls for capacity building of member states in tackling terrorism in all its manifestations. Reading between the lines, one is reassured that among other things the UN has also kept in mind the need to address why the phenomenon springs up in the first place. It is very important not only to be able to identify what one is up against but also to comprehend why it has come about, in order that it can be dealt with comprehensively.

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Patience at Phulbari

It is true that we need development. To develop our economy we need foreign direct investment for which we should be prepared to sacrifice some of our benefits, because without sacrifice we cannot gain anything. However, this sacrifice must not be made entirely by a group of people of a particular locality. Though coal mining at Phulbari may benefit the entire nation, we must not ignore the benefit to the locals, whose co-operation is essential. Thus, the final decision about coal extraction from Phulbari mine has to be based on the consent and co-operation of the locals.

ABMS ZAHUR

IF democracy is for the people why should the people tolerate any governmental action which affects the people adversely in the name of "flood of development"? The reasons for choosing open-pit mining, which destroys the environment, and the dislodging of tens of thousands if not lakhs from their ancestral homes without a proper plan for their rehabilitation, are not clear.

It is also perplexing why the government agreed to receive only 6 per cent royalty when least developed countries like Chad (Africa) can demand 60 per cent royalty, and a developing country like Bolivia (South America) can totally nationalize the mineral resources sector. It is also not understood why there was no tender for leasing out the Phulbari coal mine before the signing of a contract. Why are foreign companies allowed the privilege of production sharing contracts?

It is rumoured that Asia Energy Company (AEC) may file a suit against the government of Bangladesh for compensation, if the government cancel its agreement with the company, at the International Court of Justice.

However, the energy advisor to the government emphatically says that

as there is no agreement with the company for mining of coal the question of payment of compensation does not arise.

Like Kafco, this case had been beset with negligence or ignorance in the early nineties when BNP was in power. In 1994, the then BNP government entered into an agreement with BHP, an Australian Company. In 1998 they sold out their rights to Asia Energy (AEC), a British-Australian Company which was established in 1997. AEC started work in the Phulbari project (in the name of study) with hardly one year's experience.

In 1998 (during the AL regime), AEC started completing the work for taking control of the mine. Thus, it would be wrong to absolve the AL from the responsibility of monitoring the activities of the company. Was it willful negligence or sheer incompetence?

It is also not clear why such an inexperienced mining company, with no international standing, was allowed to exploit our precious wealth. A thorough inquiry can be made, with the concerned minister, and perhaps the secretary, being held responsible.

But such a step can hardly be expected in a corrupt country like Bangladesh. As the responsibility for allowing such deals lies with both the AL and the BNP regimes, it is only proper that the AL and the

alliance government should cooperate in solving the crisis.

Needless to say, whatever commitments had been made by Mr Mizanur Rahman Minu in Phulbari should be followed up without delay, or their credibility will be lost soon. The affected are already frustrated because no tangible help or relief has so far been received by the concerned UN who has indicated that arrival of relief may take at least a month. In Dhaka, so far, there has not been any formal discussion between AEC and the GOB. Thus, we do not know when the so called "agreement" will be cancelled.

The energy advisor seems to be in high tension. His statements sometimes go to in favour of the company, but on other occasions they appear to be in favour of the government. Needless to say that in such cases the concerned prime minister is involved. Thus, the onus of defending mainly lies with the PM.

Accusing AL or BNP, or the concerned ministers, would not be proper. Our bureaucracy, politicized or not, is rather easily influenced by the benefits offered by these companies. In the final stages of the Kafco deal an officer (of the rank and status of secretary) was accused of accepting benefits from a multinational company and lost his job.

A few words may be said about the pending case of Tata's investment in Bangladesh. Interest in investing in Bangladesh is nothing new for Tata. In the past the concerned Bangladesh governments could not respond positively because of the unacceptable conditions offered by Tata.

Bangladesh remains a loser in bilateral or multilateral deals because of our weakness in handling these cases. However, it is heartening that, for the first time in Bangladesh, the government has been able to withstand the pressures of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, India and USA for completing the deal with Tata. By postponing the case the government concerned will be able to examine the case more fully.

For Bangladesh, the huge investment of \$3.2 billion is certainly attractive, while the main attraction for Tata is the availability of cheap gas and coal. Though Bangladesh will be benefited by the investment, the main beneficiary will be India. The price of gas offered by Tata is far from acceptable.

Whatever mistakes (deliberate?) had been committed in the case of Kafco must not be repeated in this case. Apart from this, there is enough opportunity for manipulation of prices of raw materials and finished products by showing higher price of raw material (like iron ore from India) and lower price of export of finished products from Bangladesh.

Even in the case of transfer of profit to India we have to be extremely careful. Bangladesh Bank must be vigilant. We must also be careful about the draft agreement. Many say that our law ministry lacks the expertise to properly evaluate international

agreements, particularly drafts submitted by multinationals like Tata or Japanese multi-nationals. The government must pay attention to this aspect of our inadequacy as well.

As we can see, the case of Phulbari coal mining has been badly handled right from the beginning. Thus, we have no other alternative except to cancel the deal (if there was any) at the earliest because of the following factors:

- There cannot be any reason for allowing pollution in such a huge area through open pit mining in a small country with a high density of population;
- No proper plan has been made so far for rehabilitation of the local population;
- If a least developed country like Chad (Africa) can receive the benefit of 60 % royalty why should we settle for 6% royalty. Simply because our coal is located a few meters below the surface and extra cost may be involved because of the necessity for suction of ground water?
- Vast areas around the mining area will be turned into a desert, destroying the flora and fauna of the area;
- The extracted high quality coal will not be of much use to Bangladesh, because 90% of it will be exported;
- Such an inexperienced coal mining company cannot be allowed to extract our precious wealth;
- By strengthening Bapex (ignoring the advice of World Bank) we may be successful by utilizing our own experts, or we may go for joint ventures.

The term of the present government will be over in less than two months. They would, therefore, like to solve this crisis as quickly as

possible. However, it must be borne in mind that they will have to think about acquiring the ability to handle big multi-nationals in future. The following suggestions are made to help attain the ability:

- The deals with multinationals must be handled by thorough professionals (preferably local if available);
- The capacity of Bangladesh Bank must be upgraded through training of its personnel in handling the latest banking methods in US and Japan;
- The Law Ministry must appoint experts capable of handling draft agreements at international level; and
- Where such a huge number of people has to be dislodged, the people of the area have to be convinced of the benefits of the project (the present system of bribing to create division among these people must be abandoned.)

It is true that we need development. To develop our economy we need foreign direct investment for which we should be prepared to sacrifice some of our benefits, because without sacrifice we cannot gain anything. However, this sacrifice must not be made entirely by a group of people of a particular locality.

Though coal mining at Phulbari may benefit the entire nation, we must not ignore the benefit to the locals, whose co-operation is essential. Thus, the final decision about coal extraction from Phulbari mine has to be based on the consent and co-operation of the locals. It is better to wait for some time than to create a messy situation by doing the job in a hurry.

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"People's" participation

AS I SEE IT

No country in the world has a more dire necessity of the "run-off" concept than Pakistan. With a fractious society divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, a "run-off" forces diverse ethnic and sectarian groups and individuals to coalesce around someone who may not be their first choice, but who in their opinion is more acceptable than the other one. Instead of a contrived, artificial alliance, this unintended coalition becomes a natural alliance.

as the right of the majority to rule is concerned, are fulfilled.

In some countries, e.g. France, failure to get an absolute majority in the initial round leads to a run-off between the first two candidates to determine the absolute majority. There are three major objectives achieved by the "run-off" concept, viz: (1) an absolute majority of voters in an election chooses a candidate; (2) by forcing a choice between two candidates it also forces voters, having different beliefs, into one common cauldron, i.e. a coalition of sorts at the ballot box instead of manipulations in smoke-field backrooms afterwards; and (3) instead of concentrating his (or her) attention on one

core group which got him (or her) elected, he (or she) has to look after his (or her) whole constituency.

No country in the world has a more dire necessity of the "run-off" concept than Pakistan. With a fractious society divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, a "run-off" forces diverse ethnic and sectarian groups and individuals to coalesce around someone who may not be their first choice, but who in their opinion is more acceptable than the other one. Instead of a contrived, artificial alliance, this unintended coalition becomes a natural alliance. A cursory study of the election results since 1988 will show that it is only 15% of the candidates who get an absolute

majority (i.e. getting 40% or more votes), or come close to getting it. Barely another 15% get between 30-40% of the votes, and nearly 70% who are elected get less than 30% of the votes to sit in the National Assembly or the Provincial Assemblies.

While they do represent some of the people in any constituency, they do not represent the wishes of a majority of them. Neither of the major political parties who ruled Pakistan (twice each) for most of the 90s got more than 30% of the total vote, and the votes cast were less than 50% in a majority of the constituencies, translating into the fact that their mandate was trusted by less than 15% of the population. Where, then, is people's participation in governance?

No country can be united, or progress, without wholehearted participation of the people. Presently, voter skepticism about the power of the individual vote keeps voters away from the ballot box, and has rapidly developed into apathy that accepts that the system allows strong minority factions to dominate parliament.

On the other hand, the "majority vote" system will galvanize voters,

who will feel encouraged to exercise their right of franchise. As the knowledge seeps into the body politic of Pakistan that every vote matters more and more people will go to vote and/or be persuaded to do so. The ballot box is the basic measure of democracy, and the percentage of people's participation will define the full extent of democracy.

One of the factors undermining democracy in the third world (and in the first world too, as we saw in Florida in 2000) is election fraud, i.e. manipulation by vote rigging and fraudulent casting of votes. Many times people reach the polling booth to discover that their vote has already been cast by someone else. When large numbers of people do not go out to vote in any constituency, it gives room to the unscrupulous to cast bogus votes on behalf of the real voter.

In fact, the election is more and more dependant on organizing transportation effectively on Election Day. With more and more voters taking part this will be difficult to organize on a mass basis as is being done now. This bogus vote, by itself, is a negation of democracy by installing a non-representative

candidate who has been elected by fraud.

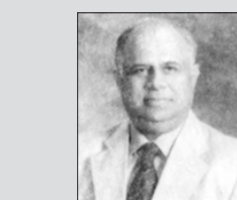
This brings criminality into the very forum that is the final authority for making the laws of the land. When criminals become lawmakers, what can one expect except criminality proliferating across the broad spectrum of society. When criminals function in the name of justice, justice becomes a crime. Those who are not criminals are forced to compromise with those who are. A manifestation of this can easily be seen in the world's so-called largest democracy where many of the legislators in Bihar, UP, Chattisgarh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, etc are either convicted, or indicted, criminals.

The other issue of importance is proportional representation on the strength of percentage of votes cast. Look at the British parliament, the percentage difference between the two major parties Labour (37%) and Conservative (33%) in elections in 2005 was only 4%, yet Labour got 150 seats more than the Conservatives, whereas the poor Liberals (22%) got far less, only about 50 seats, when they should have got around 100-120 seats according to the voting percentage.

For 37% of the votes cast, Labour got almost 50% of the seats, while the Conservatives got about the same percentage of seats as votes cast. This means that Labour gained at the expense of the Liberals. This again negates the basic essence of peoples' representation.

50% of the seats should be decided on the run-off system, and the other 50% must go to the various parties as per the percentages they poll in the elections. If PPP gets 25% of the votes cast, it must get a similar percentage of the balance 50% in a 600 seat Parliament, i.e. 75 seats. The candidates must be elected in order of priority of the percentage of votes they got as the losing candidate. This way the balance is restored in favour of people's representation.

Any electoral exercise that is not heavily weighted to give people's representation is ultimately bound to fail. Without true people's representation there can be no real democracy.



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

THE measurement of democratic norms is an inexact science that is often manipulated to suit the country, entity, or individual taking that measurement. The meaning and usefulness of democracy depends on the extent to which it serves the interests thereof of the practitioner.

It suits authoritarian regimes to describe their concept of democracy as one suited to "the genius of the people." It does not need a genius to surmise that democracy is often tailored to foster acceptance of domination by a strong minority, often perversely, and contrary to the interests of the majority.

The difference between such a

"democracy" and dictatorship lies in the eyes of the beholder. At least in a dictatorship, we can hold one person accountable.

In the two major democracies of the US and India, rightfully proud as bastions of democracy, "the first past the post" system negates the rule of the majority in favour of a strong minority, only 5% of the winning candidates got more than 50%. The right of a majority to exercise the voters' mandate must be sacrosanct.

A candidate getting less than an absolute majority is democratically "elected" in most electoral systems. It is only when he or she gains an absolute majority that the requirements of democracy, as far