

Vandalism is highly reprehensible

RMG workers need to be restrained by their leaders

MOST people are in sympathy with the garment workers' legitimate demands for remunerative minimum wage and for an improvement in their working conditions and environs. But their violent conduct on Saturday at Uttara and beyond cannot be condoned.

The series of clashes between the workers and the law enforcers that saw 50 people injured, including 10 policemen and three journalists, were only part of the story. The workers attacked Uttara police station, damaged 62 vehicles and vandalised two markets, two banks, a few wayside restaurants in an act of mayhem that spread out along the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway like wildfire. Highway traffic was closed for four hours causing excruciating hardship to thousands of commuters.

We can understand the workers' impatience for an early announcement of the minimum wage but that cannot be the reason for them to destroy private and public property and take it out on people who are not even remotely connected with their grievances. People abhor lawlessness from the core of their heart. If anything, the workers need all the moral public support they can get to have their legitimate demands ultimately fulfilled.

The most cogent point for them to realise is that their demands are sought to be resolved at the macro-level in a holistic manner, so that there is no scope either for workers of individual garment factories or their owners to precipitate any confrontational crisis between them every now and then.

But that is exactly what they seem to be doing. The genesis of the trouble in the present case is to be found in the following sequence of events: Syntax Knitwear workers converged for work at 7.30am on Saturday. On learning that the authorities have closed down the factory for an indefinite period and seeing a fellow worker in bloodstained condition, having been beaten by allegedly hired goons of the owners, the workers burst into anger and agitation followed. The situation worsened when employees from different factories joined hands with the Syntax Knitwear workers.

Collective demonstration of anger smacking of clannish outburst is an evil, because if every professional group should fall for it, then there would be total anarchy in society. At the same time, however, we would expect the garment owners to help the wage board arrive at a minimum remunerative salary for the workers at the soonest.

Durga Puja

The harbinger of peace

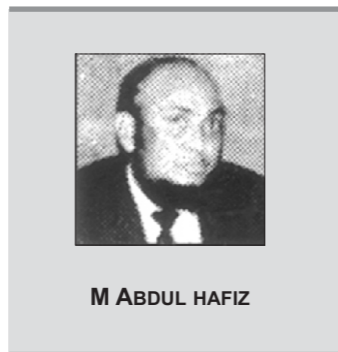
DURGA Puja, the main religious festival of the Hindu community, has been observed with great fervour and grandiosity that are integral parts of the event. According to Hindu religion, Mother Durga descends upon earth about this time of the year to cleanse the hearts of the followers and shower them with divine blessings before returning to her abode amongst the pantheon of gods and goddesses. It is said that Durga Puja remains the most revered religious occasion of the Bengali Hindus all over the world.

The five-day festivity attracted thousands of devotees to the temples and special mandaps erected for the purpose, after waiting eagerly for one year for her arrival. Traditionally, high priests decorate the image of the goddess with beautiful clothes and ornaments and submit earthly offerings at her feet amidst chanting of verses from holy scriptures. And over the chanting of holy hymns, thick smoke of incense and din of the metal bells, the eternal message of sublimity, peace and the triumph of the good over evil permeates every heart.

This year Durga Puja has been celebrated by the followers in Bangladesh in an environment of relatively improved social order. They have observed the rites in a peaceful manner without facing any untoward threat from anti-social elements. It is heartening to learn that a record high number of Puja mandaps were set up across the country by the devotees. The government deserves a word of praise for arranging tight security with CCTV and metal detectors at the entrance of major temples.

Durga Puja comes every year with the message of communal harmony. We wish the devotees a happy Bijoya.

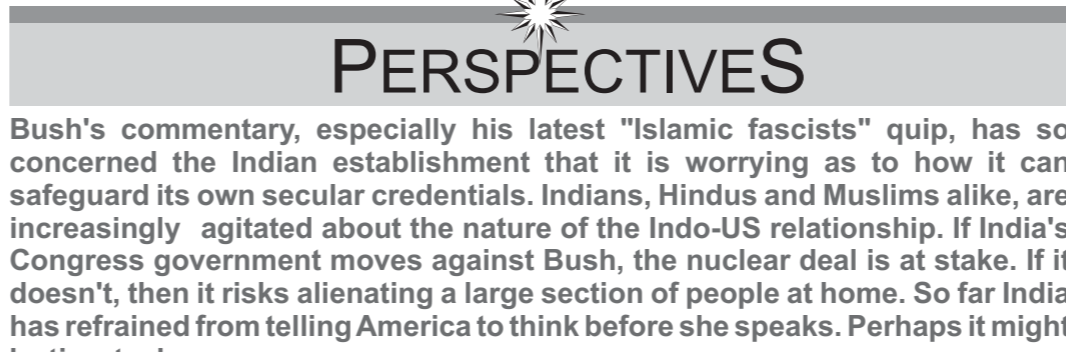
A delicate choice before India



M ABDUL HAFIZ

INDIA has suddenly withdrawn into a brittle silence since the description recently by the US president of the men behind the Heathrow terror plot as "Islamic fascists." As Bush's casual metaphors reverberate around the world, the phrases such as the Christian wars, Christian crusades, and a thousand years war between Islam and Christianity are beginning to find their way in to the politico-strategic vocabulary, also in acountry like India.

As if India hadn't had enough to contend with already in the battle of minds for a secular state. Since the country's partition in 1947, the idea of India has been rooted in a state that is divorced from religious belief while embedded in an intensely religious nation. In contrast,



Bush's commentary, especially his latest "Islamic fascists" quip, has so concerned the Indian establishment that it is worrying as to how it can safeguard its own secular credentials. Indians, Hindus and Muslims alike, are increasingly agitated about the nature of the Indo-US relationship. If India's Congress government moves against Bush, the nuclear deal is at stake. If it doesn't, then it risks alienating a large section of people at home. So far India has refrained from telling America to think before she speaks. Perhaps it might be time to do so.

Pakistan has celebrated the idea of a religious statehood, arguing that statecraft and religious fervour need not be separated according to the classic western thesis.

With 9/11, one of those terribly defining moments in history, it seemed as if the world led by Bush was going to seize the day and cut the boastfulness of Samuel Huntington down to size. Bush went to invade Iraq for no ostensible reason. Three years later with Osama bin Laden still on the loose and Iraq in the danger of being rent asunder by a civil war, the world is far more dangerous place, thanks to the hubris of the Bush administration.

To be fair, Bush's greatest advocates never accused him of being the greatest of communi-

cators. For that he mixed his metaphors all the time -- so much so that even his wife was allowed to laugh at him publicly.

After 9/11 we felt uncomfortable when we heard his "if you're not with me you're against me" thesis, but we forgave his inappropriate speech in his house of stress. With "Islamic fascists," however, the all-American president has sunken to a new low.

And it is India, like nowhere else in the world, which will suffer the most for this new characterization. India, which should have been America's ally in a difficult world with the common ideas of democracy and liberty, is finding itself increasingly irritated at having to defend this foot-in-mouth emperor.

With 150 million Muslims, India has the second largest

Muslim population in the world. India is also these days engaged in an unusually warm embrace with Bush & Co, which is pushing a nuclear energy agreement with India that would accord New Delhi a special place in the international nuclear order.

India and US are therefore "best friends" these days. So why then India is squirming so uncomfortably in the tight embrace of Uncle Sam? Instead of being in the thrall of the most powerful country in the world and instead of being delighted at the thought of having powerful friends in high places -- why does New Delhi retreat into embarrassed mumbling each time the Americans open their mouths to speak?

To understand India's dilemma, one must look at the

horror of Iraq that refuses to go away. Then, when Mumbai blast took place in the beginning of July, gratuitous American spokesmen told India that New Delhi needed proof to discontinue the dialogue with Pakistan while most of India wanted to know what proof Bush & Co had before it invaded Afghanistan, leave alone Iraq.

Then came Bush's "Islamic fascists" remark. Only recently, even as India was shifting into high alert before its Independence Day on August 15, the US Embassy in Delhi put out an advisory, claiming that "al-Qaeda" could be prowling around crowded places in Delhi and Mumbai. Twenty-four hours later, Washington had rejected its own embassy's analysis.

In the meantime, the Indian government was scrambling around to cope with a threat that wasn't. Once it had been spoken, "al-Qaeda" began to acquire a life of its own, even though India knew better that the groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad, masterminded by Pakistan's ISI, are more active in this part of the sub-continent. The biggest ever security operation in contemporary history was being mounted across the nation

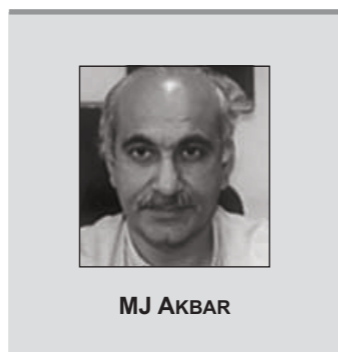
to deal with the fear of being unsafe only because America said so.

Increasingly, America's trigger-happy view of the world is beginning to bother India a great deal. The establishment still refuses all criticism until the nuclear deal gas gone through, hopefully by the end of the year. But the growing discomfort with Bush is becoming far too obvious in large parts of the country. The Indians are more and more wondering if the American embrace is not turning out to be a fatal attraction.

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Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Outbreak of peace



MJ AKBAR

ANY outbreak of peace between India and Pakistan should be handled with almost as much care as an outbreak of war. Paradoxically, now that full-fledged war, of the 1965 or 1971 kind, has been made infructuous by nuclear weapons, peace might be a more dangerous game to play than war. Failed wars can be halted by a ceasefire, as has been the story from 1948 to the Kargil incident. How does one handle a failed peace?

Peace has erupted before, sometimes more suddenly than war, sometimes in quiet incremental doses. The Shimla Agreement of 1972 did not bring peace. It merely purchased the indifference of uncertain combatants. General Zia-ul-Haq was rather more successful with his mildly escalating injections of normality (cricket, interviews, a better visa regime), but then he had a vested interest in honey. He could not afford a second front on the East while engaged with the Russians in the West. Moreover he used treacle to camouflage support for secession in Punjab. Zia was a master at eating the cake he was offering.

The last great outbreak of



I don't know if Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Musharraf consulted the same dictionary at Havana. The usual "triumphant note" was heard when they agreed upon a "joint mechanism" to fight terrorism. The problem is not about "joint," however leaky the glue might be, or "mechanism," however mechanical it might become. I do hope that the two great minds of South Asia have reached consensus on what they mean by terrorism. It would be a pity, wouldn't it, if Dr Singh began preparing his bags for a trip to Kashmir only to find that General Musharraf wanted him to visit Baluchistan? One man's terror, after all, is another man's intelligence agency.

peace was at Agra. The Agra Summit is proof of that ancient law: the higher the expectations, the greater the post-conjugal depression.

President Pervez Musharraf reveals the bitterness that failure at Agra generated, in his memoir, *In the Line of Fire* (quite a bit of it, incidentally, friendly fire). Agra failed because India and Pakistan had not checked whether the words they were using meant the same thing to both sides. That problem remains.

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after all, is another man's intelligence agency. President Musharraf did find time for some serious diplomacy in the course of his book tour through America and Britain to promote his memoir. We know that he and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan are President George Bush's right arm and left arm in a principal theatre of war. Despite the mellowing effects of a two-and-a-half-hour dinner between just the three of them -- trust me, it doesn't get cosier than that in international affairs -- Musharraf and Karzai could not bear to shake hands in public. That is how corroding a mismatch in the definitions of terrorism can be.

Musharraf had prepared for this American visit well, visiting Karzai in Kabul and meeting Dr Singh in Havana. But Karzai must have found it difficult to shake hands with a man who had just shaken hands with the Taliban in Waziristan. General Musharraf was not impelled into the Waziristan deal by sentiment but by, to use a favourite expression of his, "ground realities." Imperatives are different in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

To find common ground therefore is tough.

All politics may not be domestic, but most of it is. Bush is concerned about the inter-linkages of South Asia because Afghanistan has returned to haunt him on the eve of what could be his most difficult election: the November polls for seats in the Senate and House of Representatives. If he loses control of either House, he could be subject to the same merciless, intrusive enquiry regime that hobbled Bill Clinton. Bush does not have the ballast to push through his agenda without the help of Republican majorities on Capitol Hill.

Till last week, all the cheerleaders of the Indo-US nuclear deal were warming their hands in anticipation of applause for the successful passage of the bill through the Senate. Such is the sincerity of the cheerleaders that passage itself is considered a glorious victory, no matter how heavy the toll that is extracted along the way. The deal got stuck on domestic compulsions like illegal immigration from Mexico and a bill to define the degree of torture that will be permissible to

the CIA in its war on terror.

Sincerity was the great strength of George Bush with the American voters. But sincerity is no substitute for failure, and bad news is coming from all sides. Much in the spirit of "Wanted: Dead or Alive" Bush has conducted war on the principle that the ends justifies the means. But the means are becoming unacceptable to America, with its fundamental and constitutional commitment to liberty. Details of such means are popping up everywhere, and doing the president no good. His friend Musharraf has, for instance, revealed that the Pakistan government has been indulging in a bit of bounty hunting on the side, collecting cash in return for suspects. For a government to trade in the lives of its own citizens comes close to sordid. What might be understandable, if not acceptable, in tribal behaviour is unbelievable as government policy.

Bob Woodward, who helped Bush with his last book, published just before the presidential elections two years ago, has added fuel to the Bush fire with his latest offering, *State of Denial*. He reports that the White House has been deliberately and consistently shutting out the truth about the width and depth of Iraqi resistance.

Apparently, there is one attack on foreign troops by insurgents on an average of every fifteen minutes. Spin can delay judgment, but not deny it. Ideally, Bush would hope to postpone the judgment till some other Republican can suffer the consequences. But the omens are not too good. Bush is calling all favours, largely because there

will not be a next time on his watch.

Alas, good news is not available in a refrigerator; nor can you order it as happily as fast food. The South Asian larder, sadly, is depleted and the fires are low in the kitchen. With the best of intentions, chefs Singh and Musharraf may not be able to deliver sustenance. Given a choice between worry over Baluchistan and dealing with the Taliban, Musharraf will understandably choose to quell a secessionist movement in his country before going to war with insurgents across his border. These are the famous "ground realities."

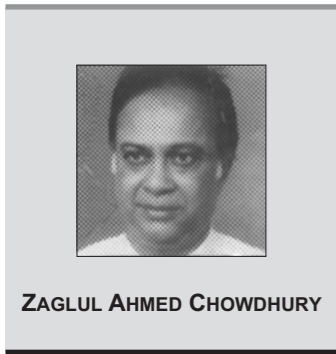
The return of the Taliban, and the corresponding rise in casualties, is slowly manoeuvring its way to the top of the American political agenda in their election season. Bush needs to hear that conflict is on the mend between allies (all three nations: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India are allies), that terrorists are on the run, and problems that breed anger are being addressed. A death rattle in Iraq was injurious enough to the opinion polls. An echo in Afghanistan could be fatal.

Under such pressure, India and Pakistan may be tempted to wave a band-aid as the cure for cancer. Indians and Pakistanis have suspended disbelief often in the past to indulge the delusions of passing leaderships. Push our people too hard, and they may soon suspend all belief in peace.

That would be a fate worse than war.

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Glimmer of hope in Sri Lanka?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

OF late, light can be seen at the end of the tunnel. Some glimmer of hope has emerged for resumption of dialogue and cessation of hostilities. Tamil militant supremo Vellupillai Prabhakaran has expressed his readiness for talks, and it appears that the government may agree in a bid to resolve the civil war. The ray of hope is now discernible while hostilities are also very much the order of the day.

Sri Lanka is clearly in trouble as war has started again, a cease-



A glimmer of hope has emerged after heavy fighting in recent times, particularly in the sea, where both sides suffered. Now the minimum requirement is that the ceasefire must be observed by both sides, should they want progress in the efforts for a settlement. All pleas from the saner sections of the people, inside and outside Sri Lanka, are clearly falling on deaf ears, as stubbornness and a fear of "loss of face" are haunting both the government and the rebels. Can they really be oblivious of the colossal destruction being wrought upon men and materials by the fratricidal war?

fire remains only on paper. The government troops and the militants are engaged in fierce battles, while peace efforts to find a negotiated settlement of the civil war have collapsed, with no sign that the two contending sides can be brought to negotiations. Indeed, it is a sad situation for the small, but otherwise prosperous, nation which is bearing the brunt, politically, economically and otherwise of more than a two decade long civil war.

Many people are fleeing their

homes, some Tamils to India and some Muslims to safer areas. This is an indication of where the crisis has gone as anxiety heightened, nationally and internationally, about the shape of things to come in the future if the hostilities continued with full ferocity. Indeed, it is a sad spectacle.

True, the 2002 ceasefire was violated frequently, but the intensity with which both sides have been fighting each other for the last several weeks is a grim reminder of the civil war that has

persisted in Sri Lanka, till a truce was agreed upon in a bid to find a negotiated settlement of the conflict, stemming from Tamil militants demand for a separate homeland in the north of the country.

What is more worrying is the ruthlessness that is being witnessed in the fighting, as evidenced by the killing of 15 aid workers, three weeks ago, of a French organization that was engaged in providing relief to the victims of the tsunami disaster.

The severity of the fighting can also be gauged from the fact that the army, navy, and air-force have been pressed into combat by the government. There is no let up in the fighting.

The talks between the government and the Tamil militants resumed in February this year, but whatever optimism the dialogue had generated evaporated in quick time, and things went back to square one, which is belligerence. Their meetings in Oslo, to break the impasse, did little to improve the hostile attitude that exists on both sides, and the mediators, the government of Norway, themselves are not pinning much hope on the prospects of a negotiated settlement. Half-hearted attempts are being made to salvage the situation. But they could not break the stalemate, and the logical development was the return of hostilities.

Recommencement of the conflict was least expected because the resumption of the

dialogue in Geneva in February, after a long gap and assiduously laid groundwork, had gone off quite well in the given difficult conditions. This resulted in a change for the better towards settlement of the complex civil war. The talks were abruptly stopped and were never resumed.

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the new opportunity created by the readiness, expressed by both, to resume talks?

Over the last several years the international community, led by the Norwegian government, had played a commendable role in the painstaking endeavour to bring the two sides to the negotiating table, and in the process the yawning gap has been narrowed down somewhat, even if not considerably.

This paved the way for the 2002 truce, and subsequently several rounds of talks were held outside the country. The dialogue between the government and the rebels was sensitive, and certain issues were evidently hard nuts to crack, but the talks were not fruitless.

Both sides gave concessions to their opponents, at times in a significant climb-down from their known positions. This has raised hopes for a solution through discussions, although everyone knows that the road will be bumpy.

Unfortunately, the progress has now been negated, and both sides are responsible for this sordid situation.

A government minister has confirmed that the militant chief Prabhakaran has shown willingness for dialogue and that president Mahinda Rajapakse is expected to respond positively. The recent loss of men and material on both sides has encouraged them to give a second thought about continuing the bloody hostilities.

However, the path to resumption of talks is still strewn with many impediments. These obstacles can be removed if both sides are really keen to give dialogue a chance. Hopefully, the government and the Tamil rebels live up to the expectations, even though they failed many a time in the past.

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