

The Burmese Provocation: We Should be Cautious

by Ahmad Mujtahid

While taking positive diplomatic move we should specially be careful not to fall into the trap of the SLORC on the one hand and playing any wrong card with the Rohingya issue on the other...

The Price of Daring Evil

On Saturday, right at noontide, a loveable, indeed beloved of many, youngman was first repeatedly stabbed and then, to make sure that it worked, bludgeoned to death. It happened on a very familiar and well-frequented busy road — Nayatola Chairman-goli and was the result of a swoop by about a dozen youngmen.

Munir Hussain, the victim, 18 and an SSC examinee, had to die because he dared, a few days back, to resist these culprits when they were teasing one lonely girl walking down the road. Munir was coming back home from some family errand when he was attacked. The hoodlums made it a regular practice of teasing girls having no formidable — and forbidding — escorts. It is possible that no one before Munir had ever taken it upon himself to challenge the ruffians. Munir paid the price for being a man — or a human being in its proper connotation — up to himself. And we are not sure if he has proved the point to the society at large which has, in the meantime, learnt to let all such things — even murders and rapes, arson and property-grabbing — pass as if nothing has happened.

In Munir we have a hero of national proportions and he was surely done his family proud. Let his example inspire more and more people to dare and stand against whatever is vile and mean and anti-social. We shall rather than mourning his horrific death, celebrate his courage and demand of both Nayatola people and DCC to build a memorial on the spot to him — as a warning to all mastans and an inspiration to all who would resist them.

The cheapest observation that one can get even without asking is about human life in Bangladesh being the cheapest and best available of all commodities under the sun. Newspapers every morning are replete with stories of murders and violence — and one always knows that these are only the tip of an iceberg nine-tenths of which lie unreported. This cannot be a consoling thought that we are in a far better situation than, say, the hub of the world civilisation, New York, where they spend, compared to us, a thousand fold for protecting life and keeping the law — and yet get people killed at least tens of times than here. It is rather disturbing that both an incapable, inexperienced and couldn't-care-less administration and a fast-decaying society are modelling their ways on the New York development in so far as going in for more policemen and spending even more on them than the increase would warrant and take it in their stride the galloping rate of homicide. It is our old social mores and ways that are keeping the figures low. Let us, while there is still time, try to re-discover and recreate our old power of the society over its rather than putting all our eggs in the basket of reforming criminality with punitive action alone — and go on *ad infinitum* increasing jails and courts and police and soldiers — or the instruments of encroachment of the state. It will not be out of place here to remind ourselves the blunders we have committed, in contrast with the other oriental people, specially the Chinese, in the matter of medicine. The same kind of suicidal blunders we are going through in matters of water management — the life-line of Bangladesh — and education, science, engineering and technology as a whole.

Our social decline must be stopped and the cruelest fact of the matter is much of it flows from our sickly politics. It is not for police and soldiers, jails or punishments to stop that. Let us all put our all to strengthening our society, however poor and incapacitated we are otherwise, at the moment.

Outrageous

The demolition of the Shaheed Minar at Edward University College, Pabna on Sunday should, on all accounts, be considered outrageous. And as expected, the outrage has been widespread and spontaneous. Different political parties, student fronts and organisations have pointed their accusing fingers at the Jamaat-e-Islami. The Islami Chhatra Shibir, Jamaat's student wing, however, has denied its part in the demolition act in any way.

Arguments and counter-arguments over the involvement or not of a particular party will not help, for these have gone for too long a time by now. The fact remains that Shaheed Minars and all that is associated with the Language Movement and the Liberation War are systematically being undermined. Those responsible for such anti-state acts, surprisingly, continue to enjoy a somewhat mysterious immunity. Admittedly, we have failed to resist the rise of the defeated forces of 1971.

Recent happenings indicate that the Shaheed Minar's demolition is nothing isolated. The Shibir made a mockery of the observance of Ekushey at Chittagong University campus and kept away the Chittagong University Central Students Union (CUCSU) at gunpoints. Then, a speaker at a seminar arranged by the Islamic Foundation claimed that no son born to Muslim parents could observe Ekushey because that, according to him, is counter to Islamic ideals. The Islamic Foundation is not known to have refuted his claim.

The parallel among the three incidents — one each at Dhaka, Chittagong and Pabna — is obvious. Denial or no denial, one thing looks quite certain that the forces opposed to the spirit of our Liberation War and all that we hold dear have been slowly but calculatively using some occasions and events as a test-case for expanding their sphere of influence. In their weird attempt, however, they have until now been considerably successful. In this, though, their success owes not so much to their design — however ingenious that may be — as to the divisions among and awful indifference of the pro-liberation and nationalist forces. Those who have been at the helm of state affairs have also not done anything worthwhile to upset the conspiratorial calculations of the anti-state elements.

Too much concessions have been allowed to these conspirators and they have abused the mercy they simply did not deserve. When re-tribute is taken for weakness and repentance for crime is not forthcoming, the criminals certainly have to be brought to the country's laws. After half a century today, the Nazis are put to trial for their war crime — no matter whether they repent or not. Justice, after all, is no retribution and the conspirators having no allegiance for Bangladesh, doubly deserve to be meted out the justice according to the law of the land.

STRIKE when the iron is hot is an old saying. There is no point crying over the lost opportunities. This old saying may be remembered on the Bangladesh-Burma relations of recent days. What is happening in Burma today is strikingly similar to what had happened in Bangladesh during 1971 in many ways. In fact the history of Burma since her independence is in many ways similar to the history of Pakistan before 1971. The process of development of politics; undermining the political institutions; authoritarian and dictatorial central government without any respect for human rights; monopolization of the state power, the defence and the civil bureaucracy by the 'Burmans'; denial of any autonomy to the constituent nationalities and the ethnic minorities; the military take over and banning of all political parties etc. are the events one might find common in both the countries.

Aung San the founding father of independent Burma was assassinated along with his other colleagues when he was busy drafting a constitution and which was thought to reflect and safeguard the legitimate interest of all nationalities and the ethnic minorities of Burma. Ever since his death politics and the political institutions were systematically bastardized by the 'Burmans' in the same way the Punjab did it in Pakistan until 1971. Any attempts at building up any democratic movement by the people were brutally crushed by the U Nu government. Incompetent and corrupt as they were the U Nu government was replaced by the military dictatorship of Ne Win like the one Ayub Khan staged in Pakistan in 1958. However, Ne Win had to go the way Ayub Khan went from the political scene, by popular mass upsurge, doing exactly what Ayub Khan did i.e. handing over the power to the military junta. As it happened in Pakistan, in

Burma too the junta was forced to hold elections to the National Assembly and committed the same blunder of miscalculating the minds of the silent majority of the voters. As the elections were not up to their liking the SLORC refused to transfer power to the elected representatives of the party that won the majority seats in the National Assembly and received the peoples mandate. In the case of Pakistan it was the Awami League and its charismatic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and in Burma it is the National League for Democracy and its charismatic leader Aung San Suu Kyi. In both the cases the military junta, instead of the respecting the wishes of the people, rather chose to arrest their leaders and unleash a reign of terror and killing to suppress and silence any attempt of opposition.

As a result mass exodus began from the then Pakistan to the neighbouring India in millions to escape torture and death at the hands of the occupation army and their collaborators who already had started killing the unarmed and the defenceless civilian population — Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists with remarkable ease. In a word they did not spare any one. They wanted to clear out the 'holy land' (East Pakistan) of the 'unholy' Bengalis.

War against Own People

In the same way the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC) has declared a war against its own people — unarmed and defenceless who voted for the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi which include Buddhists, Muslims and also Christians. These supporters of NLD belonging to different nationalities

and the ethnic minorities and different religions are crossing into Bangladesh in thousands for saving their lives from torture and death. The Rohingyas supported the party of Suu Kyi like all other ethnic minorities. The military junta have chosen to clear out the Arakan of the Rohingyas by simply pushing them to Bangladesh — a country with whom Burma claims to have friendly relations.

The Burma-Bangladesh border was violated by the Burmese armed forces as they did on several other occasions in the past. We now know that during the last many years especially since 1975 Burma has consistently been raising a huge army and procuring heavy and sophisticated modern arms. Military experts say, Burma's army today is one of the best fighting machines in Asia with 2,60,000 strong men equipped with heavy weapons mostly supplied by China and some European countries.

The spate of refugees crossing into Bangladesh is a humanitarian issue. Naturally, Bangladesh cannot drive them to the valley of death in spite of the fact that this has created serious economic problem for Bangladesh especially Chittagong South and Cox's Bazar, and on top of that problems of law and order maintenance, sanitation and shelter have compounded the situation. Reportedly a serious concern is that some interested groups are trying to fish in the troubled water: armed groups and drug mafias are growing fast in that area of Bangladesh. Modern arms bazar is also reportedly coming up, and some unscrupulous persons are said to be trading in sophisticated arms which could easily reach any hand and any point in Bangladesh.

While the younger ones, students and youths and the

intellectuals among the refugees are supporters of the NLD and seek international help and assistance in their fight for democracy so that they may return home — a democratic Burma led by their elected representatives and Nobel Suu Kyi, there are others who look at the problem from a different angle and are trying to play a communal card. This latter trend is quite dangerous and reportedly its leaders have connections with some of the rich countries of the Middle East. In a word the situation has become quite unpredictable.

Earlier Warnings

But was it so, say, six months back? Certainly it wasn't. Then why it has taken such a dramatic turn and why our Foreign Ministry bosses could not read the situation correctly? We at least cautioned our government through media and otherwise about the danger of the military dictatorship in the neighbouring country for a democratic government. We urged all, the government, the party in power, the party in the opposition and the parliament to take a serious look into what was happening in Burma especially the brutal suppression of the pro-democracy movement, refusal of the SLORC to release Aung San Suu Kyi and to hand over power to the elected representatives of the people. We suggested that in our own national interest the matter should be taken to the international forum for forcing the military junta to release Suu Kyi and to transfer power to the elected representatives of the people as a first step towards a political solution of the crisis in Burma.

Again immediately before our Foreign Minister's visit to Burma on November 17, 1991 suggestion was there that the

solution to the Rohingya problem like other minority issues in Burma could only be found by a democratic government and as such the whole issue was inextricably linked up with the setting up of a democratic government in Rangoon... and that our Foreign Minister would take up the issue of Suu Kyi also besides Rohingyas on behalf of the democratic forces of Bangladesh and also that for our own national interest we could not remain as a silent observer to what was happening in Burma.

Weeks after the so-called "fruitful" visit of our Foreign Minister, the Burmese armed forces attacked one of our border outposts, killed one BDR man and wounded others. We sought Flag Meeting and obtained a very reluctant response many days after. The results of the first Flag Meeting was reportedly repudiated by the SLORC bosses, and the Burmese officer who attended the first Flag Meeting was relieved of his duties a few days later.

While we endorse that regular meetings should be held to reduce the tension in the border and appreciate the government move to take the refugee issue to the UN Security Council. We on the other hand cannot see why should our government feign to embark upon an open and loud diplomatic move equal to the labyrinth created by the lacerating act of a neighbour so that the international community comes forward to finding a permanent solution to the issues in question i.e.

(a) Release of Aung San Suu Kyi and transfer of power to the elected representatives of Burma; and (b) Creation of conditions so that the Rohingya refugees may return to safe home at the earliest.

Positive diplomatic move should be initiated immediately for two reasons. First, in view of the daily influx of the Burmese refugees the situation in Burma is affecting us every way and as such it could no longer be viewed as an internal affair of Burma. Secondly, from all indications it appears that the SLORC has a sinister motive to drag Bangladesh into a war with Burma to divert and mislead the attention of the people of Burma and the international community away from the stark violation of human rights in Burma. This kind of tactics was adopted during our War of Liberation by Pakistan in 1971.

While taking positive diplomatic move we should especially be careful not to fall into the trap of the SLORC on the one hand and playing any wrong card with the Rohingya issue on the other, even if so suggested by some of our friends. Bangladesh leadership should very carefully analyse the various moves the Indian government took during our war of liberation and the option open before them.

The situation which SLORC and its mentors have created for the people of Burma and Bangladesh will only be aggravated unless a democratic government committed to guarantee the rights of every minority nationality under a new Federal Constitution which Aung San Suu Kyi dreamt and under which "every ethnic minority will have the right to promulgate laws for its own region in the spheres of administration, politics and economics" — is established in Burma.

The problem we are confronted with is a national one and the government should consult with all the opposition parties and brief them on the prevailing state of affairs. We may not have a D.P. Dhar or a P.N. Haksar yet Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia with a challenge similar to the one Mrs Indira Gandhi faced in 1971. Will she accept it?

Cold War End Forces India to Recast Priorities

Prakash Chandra writes from New Delhi

INDIA is facing mind-boggling problems in its relations with the rest of the world.

Many policy analysts have begun to believe that the time has come for New Delhi to cast aside its old inhibitions, ancient prejudices and worn-out cliches.

More often its has looked like an ageing woman who covers her body with exquisite saris and attractive make-up to hide an ancient disposition.

The heart of the matter is that India is fast running out of steam on key policy issues. For, the country is being pushed in a corner by the relentless march of events, dramatic changes in the world map and the sudden death of the communist empire, at least in Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union.

For a start, Indian policy-makers have begun to take another look at the United States and the Western world. And with the fall of the Soviet Union, many here also believe the Americans are trying to woo India.

Year after year India voted with the Soviet on major international issues. Its pro-Soviet posture was determined by the need to have a super-power backing for its policies on Kashmir which is disputed by Pakistan.

Indians had felt secure in the knowledge that the Soviets would veto any attempt to sponsor a plebiscite in Kashmir in line with United Nations resolutions.

This perception has now fallen. In opposition to India, the Soviets have favoured a Pakistani resolution on the creation of a nuclear-free zone in South Asia.

As a Soviet diplomat says privately, "It is high time our friends in New Delhi realise that the world situation has changed. While we are not abandoning you, India has to forge new relationships."

Observers have noted that the reason why the former Soviet Union voted for a nuclear-free zone was the growing nuclear might of India. And the Americans, too, are worried over the nuclear capacity of Pakistan.

"For the first time since World War II, the US is looking at the developing world through clear prisms, not distorted by its rivalry with the USSR," says Dr Bhabani Sen Gupta, a well-known academic.

In a recent article in the leading *Hindustan Times* newspaper, Dr Sen Gupta noted that "The cold war is not ended in South Asia. India and Pakistan are now locked in building competitive nuclear capability."

"India is surely ahead of Pakistan as it is in missiles also. To what extent they are also nuclear powers is the question that creates international anxiety and concern."

In talks with Indian diplomats, the Americans have made it clear that a regional approach must be evolved to the question of nuclear non-proliferation in South Asia. In

other words, concrete action is required of India and Pakistan indicating a stop in the nuclear race between them.

As a first step, the Americans seem to have succeeded in curbing the opposition of Indian officials to a nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Now it looks like the treaty is no longer an insurmountable barrier in Indo-American relations.

Influential politicians of nearly all political parties have demanded that India should not bow to a sell-out to American pressure. But there are clear signs the Cabinet will take a firm stand.

"We have to change in view of new developments," one senior official says. "We can realise the same objective — a curbing of Pakistani nuclear power. We have to accommodate American interests in the overall interest of peace in the region." American officials have also assured New Delhi that India's security considerations will be respected.

India must also get its act together not just nearer the home front but abroad, too. First on the agenda of the Narasimha Rao government is the pressing question of relations with Israel. India also has to do something to assert itself

in South Africa and build economic relations with that country.

Observers realise that it is not enough to applaud Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress. It will be necessary to have diplomatic presence in Pretoria sooner than later to promote the process of black rule in that troubled country. This can hardly be done by treating South Africa as a political leper.

And then there is the all-important issue of Israel. An Arab Ambassador used to say in the Fifties that 'India is more Arab than the Arab governments.' Many dispassionate diplomats in Asia now feel that New Delhi has played too long to the tunes of some Arab nations.

It is not an extremist position if the Foreign Office finally decides to exchange ambassadors with Israel. The first major move by India to patch up relations with Israel was made last December when New Delhi voted with the Americans and others for a repeal of the UN resolution adopted 16 years ago describ-

ing Zionism as racial.

The Muslim opinion in this country will not be enraged if New Delhi tries to help the Arabs in their search for peace by its presence in the ongoing peace talks.

This can hardly be done by keeping a distance from Israel. An Indian ambassador in Tel Aviv may not be able to work miracles. But there will be a chance to talk directly with the Israelis.

The time has come for an Asian leader like India to assert its position on the Palestine issue. And this can only be done by coming to terms with the Israeli reality.

— Depthnews Asia

OPINION

Paradox of Bangladeshi Womanhood

When I was just a little girl in the third grade, our teachers used to punish us for misdecanour by making us sit besides one of the boys. That was 1975, and even as recently as 1989 a professor at the university I attended had asked a friend to go and sit with the boys in last row to ensure that he would receive her undivided attention in the future anatomy classes. Somethings never change.

The social values within each person is instilled from the time of youth making it very difficult to detach oneself from its values and morals even when something is desperately wrong. A woman is more easily victimized because of her opaque vulnerability. She is born as someone's daughter, lives as someone's wife during her adulthood and dies as someone's mother. Society has also predestined this chronology, she can not become a mother before she can be a wife (it's a taboo if she does even without any fault of her own). But the same society will encourage men to break their marriage vows or take the next wife when the previous wife did not produce especially a male heir, even the thorn to be inherited by the child is nothing more than a sepulchre of emptiness.

A woman is the most neglected oppressed and discriminated against person at her home and workplace if she has one. Often she is beaten into submission when she can not be dominated and is incapable of understanding male logic (physical and mental abuses are almost the same, only difference is the visible or invisible wounds). Were women always treated with such hostility?

The feminine embodiments in the subcontinent have symbolized gracefulness, honour, devotion and fidelity. Their beings are also equated to purity, sacrifices and spiritual power. It is funny that the same people should fall victims to the

various talons of oppression.

Bengalis have always been progressive by nature. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore and Raja Ram Mohan Roy were some of the most progressive thinkers of contemporary history. Great writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had already created the character of Devi Choudhuri long before feminist movement gained popularity in the west. In fact it was only in 1833 that Oberlin became the first educational institution to open its door to women and the recent movement in America gained strength only in the 1960's after John F. Kennedy became the President (e.g. genesis of organizations like NOW). The influence of Bengali Hindu tradition has contributed significantly towards our culture (red saris at weddings, gaye halood etc.). This culture is observed in middle class families where education is given importance.

Unfortunately, in spite of it all there has been very little progress made in the middle class families because marriage is still the first priority. Today when a woman says that she has a career it basically means that she is juggling with the responsibilities of her family on one hand and career on the other and very few can manage to make a successful balancing act.

Our social framework is architected to meet custom-tailored specifications. So even when a woman is capable of taking independent and intelligent decisions and is economically emancipated enough to direct the course of her life, she is pressurized into marriage. Even with a PhD in Applied Physics, for instance, her priorities are in keeping the food and bed warm for her husband. If such is the paradox of Bangladeshi womanhood then what is the point of allowing them to reach the paramount of their academic career if the ultimate destination is in the backyard hang-

ing out the dirty laundry?

This is not an organized attack against the wonderful institution of marriage (although the temptations are adequately supported at times) nor is it an approval of an extreme form of feminism. The point here is to encourage women to be honest enough to admit to themselves what is it that they wish for themselves. No one should hide behind any facade and pretend to be happy with it. The choice is limited to either getting what they like or liking what they get. The thin line dividing the two are not always easy to distinguish.

Of course being a feminist has several implications which can not be defined. Invariably when people meet a 'feminist' they immediately presume that here is a woman of the world capable (deservingly so) of picking up the checks and opening her own doors. Pseudo-intellectuals are bound by superficial parameters of text book terminologies. Feminism is a philosophy which encourages free thinking without indicating an individual's sexual preference. To be a feminist means having the liberty of giving wins to one's own expressions without fear and it means living according to one's own ideology. However it does not guarantee their success or failure.

There are many contemporary issues to think about. Women must realize that they have the right to chose what they want for themselves; they should asked for equal partnership in marriage; they should fight against sexism; they should asked for equal pay for equal work; and they should also have a say in when to have children. They should not sit back depending on others to make decisions for them (This does not make someone into Germaine Greer or Gloria Steinem). Severing the umbilical chord is not always an easy thing to do.

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To the Editor

Dhaka city and the rickshaws

Sir, Dhaka is the capital of an independent country. Even if we do not compare it with London, Tokyo or Washington we should start imagining our city in league with Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, New Delhi and other capitals of Newly Industrializing or Developing countries. Mobility of the people and quick communication in a capital city is essential for the functioning of a state. In our city telecommunication being scarce, physical movement of the people is very large.

Rickshaws cater for this movement to a great extent. Also, rickshaws provide livelihood to over a million people including owners, pullers and their dependants. At the same time rickshaws is an impediment to the maintenance of proper order in the traffic system of the city. It is slow moving, the vacant ones moving helter-skelter soliciting passengers. It appears that traffic laws are not applicable to rickshaws.

Statesmen, sociologists and other elite may differ but lesser beings like me cannot imagine how our country can prosper or the state can continue to function if rickshaws are not eliminated from the city.

Easier said than done. What will happen to the million (or more?) who now depend on this source of living? How to provide means of transportation to several more million commuters?

A solution must be found. And the process can be started by putting into service several hundred large-bodied buses on the main thoroughfares. The bus company will be owned by a cooperative of the erstwhile rickshaw owners and rickshaw-pullers who would themselves invest a small sum but be generously aided and funded by government and NGOs. Employment will be provided to the suitable rickshaw pullers and others would be trained if they are found employable after a crash course.

These buses would ply on main roads mainly as substitutes for rickshaws and would operate as fixed-fare transports for fixed stoppages. Rickshaws would not operate in these roads. We will gradually develop the habit of walking a short distance to the exact point of our destination. In cities like London, Singapore etc. people have to walk various distances even after availing underground trams and taxis.

Introduction of metered taxis will take care of emergencies. This, of course, is a tongue in cheek solution to a very complex problem. But may I repeat that we should start doing something concrete without losing any time.

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BTV's "Aboshar" and MPs

Sir, Recently the Bangladesh Television produced and telecast a programme titled—"Aboshar" (leisure) in which the respectable Members of the Parliament and some government Ministers took part. The programme was quite entertaining. The song—"Besh Kichu Shomoy To Thakiam, Rakhiam Mon Rakhiam" presented by the programme compare with the magnificent. The recitation of Poet Jashimuddin's "Kabor" poem also touched our heart.

We sincerely appreciate the Information Minister's move to produce such a cultural programme. Through holding such cultural function, I feel, the rapport between the government MPs and opposition MPs will be strengthened.

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