

The Common Concern is for Curbing Communalism

THE frenzied demolition of Babri mosque and its aftermath is certainly one of the worst things to have happened to India in recent years. Because of the communal nature of the incident, its impact has been felt throughout India and beyond. Killing, arson and looting, all the concomitants of communal riot, have taken place. These have sent a shudder of horror throughout the subcontinent. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, too, rioting in all its fury has been reported. For Bangladesh, the chain of events is particularly painful to its people. Not that we have not seen riots, and communal frenzy here, but we have always taken pride in the fact that we have had a commendable record of communal harmony, generally speaking. People here have resisted in the past attempted breach in communal harmony, especially when they have detected the unholy hand of autocracy in it. Many of us still remember one such attempt in the last days of Ershad and how the citizens rose in resistance, and foiled the dark designs of the autocrat.

Governments in all the three countries have taken prompt measures to curb the rioters and to contain the violence. The Indian Prime Minister Mr PV Narasima Rao has been under attack, both in

India and elsewhere, for his alleged ineptitude in handling the situation, for his failure to foresee the peridy of the BJP government of Uttar Pradesh. Everybody is wiser after the event. Did we ourselves anticipate that after the warning from the highest judiciary, after the solemn undertaking from very responsible people that the warning will be heeded, and no body was going to harm the mosque, it could happen? It is only after the worst has happened that we have gained a clarity of vision which, till the other day, we didn't possess.

But even if the charge of mala fide intentions will not be levelled against him, Narasima Rao will find his leadership seriously challenged. By taking quick and decisive action against communal parties and organisations and by promising of rebuild the mosque, by putting under arrest Advani and a few other leading figures spearheading the movement for demolishing the mosque, Narasima Rao may have at least redeemed partly his credibility as a leader. How and to what extent he follows it up by foreign new political alliances, and by healing the wounds of an aggrieved community, all

this remains to be seen. A serious blow has been dealt to the ideal of Indian secularism. The rise of the BJP has been quite spectacular, and has been a disquieting feature of Indian politics. Curiously enough, the alliance of the communal parties in Pakistan, ostensibly to resist the PPP, and the emergence of Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh, have been parallel developments in the two neighbouring countries. Fundamentalist forces have made political gains in certain other countries of the Muslim Middle East. BJP has emerged as the second biggest political party after India's latest elections. Jamaat-i-Islami, failing to achieve as much, has thought it wise to lend its support to the ruling party in Bangladesh, hoping to enjoy the protection of BNP. Whatever protection it has been receiving it sorely needs at the present moment, with the Golam Azam issue still hanging fire. Communal tension in India, as and when it occurs, will provide matter for Jamaat in Bangladesh and its allies to decry in public and to

welcome without acknowledgement since it furthers its aims at home. This is nothing short of making a political capital out of communalism. Narasima Rao's act of banning communal parties has stopped short of including BJP in this drastic measure. Perhaps it would be too big a morsel to swallow. Still, to the extent communal forces stand condemned in India, their counterparts will feel threatened in Bangladesh.

A state policy, the unhindered activity of certain groups and parties, mainly Jamaat-i-Islami, has produced and strengthened sentiments which find nothing wrong in setting fire on temples here if they have damaged a mosque there, in killing a Hindu in Bangladesh if they have killed Muslims in India. The sheer madness and perversity we have witnessed in the past few days should be traced back to its origins, if we really want to establish a democratic, a truly Islamic society. It would appear that those who are opponents of Islam in politics are the worst enemies of Islam.

As far as official statements go our condemnation of Hindu vandalism in India has been prompt and effective. But what about our condemnation of Muslim vandalism in Bangladesh. The Indian Prime Minister has reiterated his plans to reconstruct the Babri mosque. We have quite a number of burnt down or otherwise damaged Hindu places of worship here. We are awaiting a similar announcement by our Prime Minister. Pakistan has already done so. I have no doubt that our government is very much shocked by the turn of events and I have no doubt

that we in Bangladesh are ashamed of the senseless barbarism that has occurred here. But have we expressed this as clearly and unequivocally as we owe it to our conscience to do?

More important than verbal expression of sorrow and shame is the question of curbing communalism by determined action. Indications are quite clear that communalism over the years has been allowed to grow and to strike roots in this country by powers and forces opposed to democratic values, by powers and forces not reconciled to Bangladesh as she emerged in 1971.

We do not expect the pre-set government to go as far as banning the communal parties. Like anti-Semitism in certain parts of Europe, religious intolerance has remained latent in large areas of the Indian subcontinent. This may well be the most potent force working against the forces in favour of a civil society. It would appear that of the seven SAARC countries, next only to Pakistan, we are the most vulnerable to the danger arising out of communalism. We thought we had buried it, "deeper than did ever plummets sound," in the year of our struggle for freedom. But no, we didn't. We have to do it now.

Homage to Our Martyrs

In paying homage to our intellectuals who earned their martyrdom on this day 21 years ago and, indeed, right through the War of Liberation, we recall what is both the most glorious and the saddest chapter of our struggle for independence. It is glorious because so many members of professional classes made their supreme sacrifices to uphold the values and ideals underlining our fight for freedom. In doing so, they proved to the world at large that the urge for liberation had moved the hearts and minds of a cross section of our men of letters, academicians, doctors, journalists, social workers, among others, who, once far removed from active politics, were eventually regarded as enemies by the invading army. Through their sacrifices, they thus added a new dimension to our War of Liberation.

The sad fact is so many of our intellectuals were murdered when the liberation of Bangladesh was a *fait accompli*, when we could already see the new dawn heralding our freedom. They were thus victims of a mindless vengeance, cruel retribution, their main crime being that they represented some of the best brains of the country and, individually and collectively, an asset for the new state. Again, if they had the time and opportunity, they would have taken arms against the enemy and gone to the front, instead of being dragged from their homes and killed in the most merciful manner. Thus, they became martyrs, without getting an opportunity of demonstrating their heroism in the battlefields.

What's more, it is not only in the recollection of this day, 21 years ago, that causes so much sadness and anguish. The same feeling is evoked by the situation prevailing around us today, a situation that threatens to undermine and even destroy the values and ideals that our martyred intellectuals fought for all their lives, through their speeches and writings, in social exchanges and, indeed, in their every day activities. Without any exception, they were all ardent believers in secularism, communal harmony, liberal humanism and in all that is best and noble, enduring and priceless in a nation's life. All this is now under attack from quarters which seek a revival of rightwing extremism, religious fundamentalism and sectarianism, not just in this country but in various parts of the region. If there are clear danger signals that we may be entering a new unpredictable era of darkness, we also note with despair that the forces which can defend the values our intellectuals stood for are in disarray, unable to offer an united resistance to the threats facing our country.

However, while we may be alarmed over the crisis, we also firmly believe that it is within our power, the power of the democratic progressive forces, to reverse the situation. But we can achieve this only if we can end the divisiveness that is eating into the vitals of our people, not just on the question of reestablishing total communal harmony but also on other crucial national issues. When we start tackling these issues through a broad-based consensus, we will discover that the overwhelming majority of our people stand by the values that our intellectuals, past and present, uphold at all costs. We may also know that millions of our people, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, would be prepared to stand together and fight for their right to live in harmony and peace.

When we rediscover what we are and what we believe in, what we stand for and what we should fight for, we will be paying a part of our debt that we owe to our intellectuals who earned their martyrdom 21 years ago.

Responding to Somalia's Cry: The US Takes Charge

AS more than 28,000 US troops begin their humanitarian mission in Somalia, the first US military intervention not pursuing a political or military goal, there is increased concern in Washington that though billed as a two to three months operation, this is going to be a long and bitter winter for the US marines. "We shall have to deal with tough and mean clans in Somalia and achieving our goal will not be easy," the US envoy in Kenya has warned.

Obviously the view is not shared by many, especially those in the circle of President Bush who see this as an opportunity for him to end his Presidency with a certain degree of pride. "Our mission is purely humanitarian," Mr Bush has said. "American forces will not stay one day longer than is absolutely necessary," he told Congressional leaders last week trying to allay their fear of another long term US involvement in a foreign country. While General Colin Powell the Joint Chief of Staff and Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary, have insisted that this is going to be a relatively easy operation that can be folded up pretty soon, both have indicated that a 'residual' American force may have to stay on to help the UN peacekeepers to allow a peaceful transition. This residual contingent may remain deployed indefinitely. As some observers think, getting out of Somalia will not be so easy as it was to move in, something the Clinton administration is going to find out soon after its inauguration on 20 January.

It is still unclear what ex-

actly the US marines will try to achieve within the given time-frame. All senior Bush administration people initially suggested that the sole aim of the operation would be to ensure safe delivery of humanitarian assistance. The day the mission was announced by the US Gen. Colin Powell ruled out "disarming" the armed elements in Somalia as it was not in the purview of the operation, a position since revised by him. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali who has spearheaded the move to mobilize greater international action to help the Somalians, insists that ensuring safety of the relief supplies won't be enough. No serious peace-making effort can be undertaken unless the armed units are pacified. The mistake we made in the past was to try to promote peace negotiations while the factions were still armed and fighting. We will not repeat that mistake," Mr Boutros-Ghali told the New York Times following Security Council's unanimous vote approving the US-led operation. It is not clear if he wants the US to peruse that objective as well.

The Security Council resolution, which authorized the mission under US command itself is not entirely specific on the nature of enforcement. According to insiders, the US had insisted on omitting any direct specific mention of "disarming" the Somali factions, it instead called for ensuring a secure environment for humanitarian relief operation in Somalia. Some Pentagon officials have argued that in a country awash with weapons, the US forces can-

not be expected to round up every weapon. Factional leaders in Mogadishu have already indicated that they are in no mood to surrender. If the US troops make things too tough for us, we will simply disappear in the countryside," a Somalia gunman was quoted here by some newspapers.

Political analysts, on the other hand, think that precisely for the same reason, the US/UN peacekeepers must ensure massive disarmament. They believe that the bandits who roam around Mogadishu and other major cities looting food and terrorizing foreign relief workers, will quickly retreat. Relative peace may be restored within weeks and the marines would be ready to leave in no time. But what happens if the bandits return after the marines are gone? According to one Pentagon official quoted by the New York Times, there are enough arms in Somalia to fuel hostilities for 100 years. One of the options now being considered by the US, it is learnt, is to buy the weapons from the Somalis. Reports from Mogadishu have indicated that the Somalis are willing give up weapons if monetarily compensated instead of spending millions of dollars on maintaining a full-scale military mission, it could prove much easier to buy up all weapons in Somalia. One political analyst has stated that the total cost for buying up all weapons in Somalia will not exceed nine to ten million dollars. Both General Powell and Secretary Cheney have indicated the US readiness to try out such effective but were

cautious not to make any specific commitment at this early stage. This is going to be before of the policy dilemmas the Clinton administration will have to grapple with, analysts agree.

While the US operation has been grudgingly accepted by many third world countries especially in view of the fact that the entire bill will come out of the US pocket, many are nervous that this may set a dangerous precedent. Both China, a permanent member, and India, correctly chairman of the Security Council for the month of December, have originally expressed reservation for such a US-led mission. Many had even expressed concern that China might abstain from voting at the Security Council, thus breaking the tradition of unanimity established since the international coalition campaign against Iraq. Though China voted for the resolution, it cautioned that unilateral military actions by certain countries could have adverse effects on the collective role of the United Nations. Reports from Mogadishu recognized that the situation in Somalia was unique that necessitated a new approach, but in the long-term only dialogue and consultation between parties concerned could bring about nations reconciliation.

Some African countries have, however, openly welcomed the move themselves unable to do anything about it, they enthusiastically endorsed the enforcement plan. Salim Ahmed Salim, once a vociferous "anti-imperialist", went one step ahead and insisted that the troops should remain deployed through the entire process from halting starvation to restoring Somalia to its own feet. Taking part in a fund raising session for Somalia in Harare last week, Mr. Salim defended the US-UN mission as "necessary given the absence of any central authority and order."

Many American policy-makers, however are worried that the Somalia mission may only be the beginning of many similar engagements by the US in various hot spots around the world. Ideas have already been floated for similar operations in Haiti and Bosnia. Some Africa countries want the Americans to go to Liberia, Sudan and Togo. As the "only remaining superpower," the US can not ignore its responsibility in the maintenance of international peace and security, the Bush administration officials have argued. While President-elect Bill Clinton has enthusiastically backed the move many Clintonites are worried that this - any future mission of similar nature - may well disrupt Mr Clinton's plan to concentrate on domestic economy "like a laser beam." Without any strategic interest of the US at stake, "humanitarian missions" like the present one could easily become an eye-sore to Mr Clinton's restive electorate. Besides, Mr Clinton will be hard pressed to define where and when the US may interfere not only by providing the muscle power but also by footing the bill. Writing in this week's New York Times, senior correspondent Elaine Sciolino says one of the first challenges for the Clinton administration will be to articulate new criteria for humanitarian intervention. "Does the US intervene to feed starving children, restore law and order or promote democracy? And how does Mr Clinton explain such action to the American people, who may be more eager to restore law and order at home and feed American children first?" she asks.

While the Somalia mission will be there for Mr Clinton to worry about in the days immediately after he takes over, Mr Bush may consider this as his last hurrah. As the matter is articulated both in words and actions, the concept of the "new international order," the mission offers him an opportunity to leave the office with a sense of accomplishment. If his military success in the Gulf was clouded by controversies and opposition both at home and abroad, the Somalia operation will be the first one in recent history when use of force by US is actually welcomed by people around the world.

The US alone cannot right the world's wrongs, but we also know that some cases in the world cannot be resolved without American involvement, that American action is often necessary as a catalyst for broader involvement of the community of nations," he told US Congressman.

If successful in the treacherous marshes of Somalia, the world will finally be ready to accept US not as the "dirty imperialists," but as a genuine hope for peace the world over.

Freedom from Hunger

A hundred and sixty nations converged recently on Rome and came up with a very elevating World Declaration on Nutrition which pledges to eliminate famines by the year 2000. This was very transparently a conference on world hunger which, in spite of the courageous words in which the participants proposed to take on the challenge, failed to call itself as such. UN figures say although enough food is grown by man to feed all the inhabitants of this planet, some 780 million would go hungry. This shows hunger to be no agricultural problem but one heavily dependent on policy and management failings and inadequacies of social attitudes and cultural preferences. If one single agency can be blamed for contributing mightily on both those fronts and by and large causing the whole of the ludicrous situation - that agency is the governments of the world. How would the self-same governments, in a matter of only seven years, so restructure the administrations and reform their ways of wanting things to happen their way?

We in Bangladesh cannot but tend to take all slogans promising delivery of this or that item of our national desiderata by the year 2000 with a grain of salt. This is so because we have been promised too many things by that time and all of them unrealisable even in four times as much time. Health for all, education for all are two samplings taken from the exhibits on the gallery of the absurd. To that formidable array must we now add Food for All by 2000 underwritten as it has been by the Rome conference of nations including ours.

At least to honour the World Declaration on Nutrition which, among other things, says, "Hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable in a world that has both the knowledge and the resources to end this human catastrophe," Bangladesh, on its part, must work in a manner that would bid good-bye for ever to hunger. What is that manner? To put it unabashedly simplistically, it should boil down to two things: poverty alleviation and employment. Which are but two sides of the same coin.

What is the performance of our successive governments on these two fronts? We cannot fault our farmers who have been, in spite of hunger and a host of other debilitating things, turning in an ever-increasing national grains output. Hunger is when you cannot buy food. You cannot buy because you have no work that will give you money. How many new openings have been made for the new generation of 15 million in the last decade? Little. And on the other side landlessness among farmers, joblessness among self-employed weavers and potters and blacksmiths and fishermen have led to a horrifying situation of general pauperisation.

Modest and meaningful targets, and radical changes in attitudes, policies and ways of achieving things are the minimum that we require to commence a real journey away from hunger and ethnic decline.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Does a mother cry 21 years after her son's death?

Sir,
I am terribly upset by a report carried by your esteemed newspaper on December 7, 1992 where your Staff Correspondent has quoted Jamaat-e-Islami's Maulana Abul Kalam Yusuf as saying "It is said that her son died in 1971. But does a mother cry 21 years after her son's death? She is being persuaded to pretend to cry. She just wants to create anarchy in this country."

I learnt from the same report that Jahannara Imam's son Rumi, a freedom fighter, was captured by the Pakistani Army on August 13, 1971 in Dhaka and his body was never found. It is presumed Rumi was killed.

I am not a political person and I do not want to pass any judgement on what Jahannara Imam is doing. But I am a mother and I strongly protest what Maulana Yusuf has said. A mother cannot forget a child that she has carried in her womb for nine months - the flesh of her flesh, the blood of her blood, the child she tenderly feeds, clothes and cares

for. The child she plays with, the child she guides and educates. A mother remembers her child/ children always because a mother's love is selfless and forever.

I request Maulana Yusuf to ask his mother if she would cry for 21 years if he died. I am sure her answer would be in the affirmative. The vacuum created in a mother's life by a child's death cannot be filled up by anybody else or by anything else. Maulana Yusuf should not pass such cruel statements and I think he should apologise to all mothers for this (of course if your Correspondent quoted him correctly).

G S Choudhury
Dhaka

Moulana Bhashani

Sir, The occasion was the 17th death anniversary of Maulana Bhashani, the great champion of the 'haventots'. The place was 'Utshab', a community centre in the neighbourhood of high society of Nasirabad Housing Society. The participants were elite drawn from the intelligentsia and nouveau riche. They were feasting and exchanging pleas-

anties irrespective of their differences. None with the tolling masses, the kinsfolk of Bhashani were there.

The meal was arranged ostensively for seeking salvation of the departed soul of late Moulana Bhashani. But true to the name of 'Utshab', the lights flared and the gathering was in a festive mood. The surfeit mass was observing the death anniversary of the leader of the masses!

Golam Nabil
East Nasirabad, Chittagong.

Jamuna Bridge

Sir, We are worried to know that the World Bank will clearly speak about their commitment regarding funding of Jamuna Bridge after examination of the accounting aspect at the end of December. The authority of World Bank has expressed concern about the proposal of rehabilitation of the people who maybe affected by the construction of the bridge.

The international tender for the project has already been floated. The acceptance process is going on. The project cost has been assessed after considering the rehabilitation cost of the people who will be affected. The people who will be affected are more or less poor and landless. They are frequently affected by river erosion and flood.

We have told again and again that Jamuna Bridge is a bridge for economic development of the whole nation. The entire nation and political par-

Rohingyas

Sir, The Article entitled "Rohingya Refugee Crisis", by Mr Sabir Mustafa published in your daily on 15.11.92 is really exciting. Please allow me to add a bit more.

We are very grateful to the government and people of Bangladesh for their kind effort to restore the rights of Rohingyas. But the Burmese are not keeping their words, Citizenship certificate to Rohingyas is still denied though it was agreed in the nine rounds of talk between Dhaka and Rangoon. More restrictions have been imposed on the movement of Rohingyas. To travel to Rangoon is now quite impossible even in a case of life and death question. The educated and elite Rohingyas are arrested on false charges and many of them are hiding.

In short, the attitude of the Burmese government (SLORC) towards Rohingyas has not change. They have to face the ill treatment of the Burmese authorities in one way or another. For this reason SLORC is always rejecting the role of UNHCR in the repatriating process.

Massive human rights violations of the SLORC forced the Rohingyas to take refuge in the democratic country of Bangladesh. The democratic governments of UNU and U Ba Swe recognized Rohingyas as an indigenous race of Burma. Even their language was aired twice a week by the Burmese Broadcasting Service.

May we appeal to the world bodies, the ASEAN, the SAARC and the OJC member countries to persuade the Burmese government to create a genuine congenial atmosphere so that the refugees can go back and enjoy peaceful coexistence with their fellow citizens with equal rights.

AFK Jlahint
NLD activist,
Arakan, Burma

It's really rare

Sir, Supposedly, most of us will agree that just or true words are rare in this society. Unpleasant words are refrained from being spoken, even though it may be beneficial. To flatter on account of acquaintance, for no apparent reason, is an inherent human nature. There are very few people who are not cowed down from speaking the truth; because of conflict of interest, for fear, or for fear of not being in the good books precludes one from uttering the proper assessment. Benevolent, and at the same time sweet words are rare - whereby real truth remains hidden in the abyss.

Even a well-wisher and propitious relation is rare; choked with pride and jealousy they frequently keep on sitting on our tails (speaking symbolically), resort to doing harm and act as a barrier towards newer heights of fulfillment.

KS Nazrul Hasan
North Road, Dhanmondi,
Dhaka

Ershad's crime

Sir, Basing on Senator Kerry's report General Ershad allegedly smuggled out Tk 2000 crore out of Bangladesh through BCCI. BCCI has got all the papers available in the Bank. Why should not Govt of Bangladesh appoint a commission to scrutinize the papers of BCCI instead of relying on Kerry's report? Only then we would be able to pinpoint the crime allegedly committed by Gen Ershad and take necessary legal action against him.

Golam Shamely, Dhaka