

Keeping to the Core of the Spirit

It is not a flight from the mundane that Ramadan is all about. The occasion is no doubt evocative of a hallowed religious fervour — in memory of the revelation of the Holy Quran during the month — but its spirit coheres with worldly affairs in very essential terms. For, the Ramadan puts to a severe test our capacities for self-restraint in personal lives which in their totality have an unquestionable bearing on our social or collective well-being.

The Ramadan actually seeks to bring out the best in us in relation to fellow-beings at large. You are supposed to burn in the kiln by being famished until sundown to feel the pinch of hunger of the starving and be empathetic towards them. You better not go on the binge at the Iftar parties and overspend thereby making a casualty of both empathy and austerity.

The core message of the month is to avoid all forms of excesses, regardless of whether these are committed swathed in an overzealous religiosity or done deliberately to reap the benefits from a demand-driven market. The sensitivity of the restaurant business and hotelery is understandable but incidents should be avoidable so long as these are pursued without hurting the sentiments of *Rojdars*. While the appeal is to the good sense of both who may go for the hype and the others who are to show respect to the fasters, there is no reason why normal economic activities should be upset.

But what worries most is the sharp rise in the prices of essentials that has already occurred boding extremely ill for the rest of the month. The daily necessities were reportedly selling dearer by 10 to 25 per cent on the day before Ramadan. The gradual upward climb in the prices from the levels of last month is a repetition of the same old story of trading speculatively and exploitatively on high demands. Making a whole year's profit in a month leading to Eid-ul-Fitr has been too much of a lure to spread the profits thin on high demands for a month and still make good money in the end. There are sure to be *Rojdars* among the tradesmen who are expected to give a better account of themselves. At any rate, over-enthusiastic policing of the market better not stray into disruptive raids on the shops which invariably make for another spate in the price rise. Efficient gathering of market intelligence ought to enable us to do the job quietly at the roots rather than go crazy in the open. Let the law enforcers move against toll collection.

Fasting is often made an excuse of to work less at the offices. The net result of this happens to be a slow-down in the economic and administrative activities. This even goes to affect decision-making. Actually there should be more efficiency and greater output during the month for its corrective emphasis on ethics and social commitment. It is more focussed and responsible work that is expected during the month.

The high-profile Iftar parties thrown by the Prime Minister, ministers, leader of the opposition and other political personages, under pandal sometimes, during the last year, did more of PR job than account for rewarding interactions among the various groups. These rather expensive events came aplenty in a flurry, with one set of organisers trying to steal a march over the other. The parties would be justified this time around if instead of serving as a medium of public posturing they advance the cause of live-and-let-live in national politics.

Power Failure: Whose Fault?

Uninterrupted and fail-safe supply of electricity in this country is perhaps too tall an order to be met. But a reasonably regular supply with prior notice for unavoidable load-shedding is not too much to ask. For a few weeks now there is no knowing when the power failure will come about and once it has taken place when the supply will be restored. The fact that the Power Development Board (PDB) or for that matter Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) does not even feel the necessity of informing the public of the intermittent snapping of power is what people find unacceptable. The idea of expressing regret through a public notice or notices seems to have failed to appeal to the authorities.

The way the electricity authorities are treating the people is outrageous — not so much because of the irregular supply but because of the callous mentality working behind the awful system. Even within limitations, the system can be made more accountable and transparent — provided that the men in charge are aware of their obligation to the consumers. If the people are taken into confidence, they will be only too willing to bear with the generating and distributing authorities. The fact that reporters have to unearth what really has gone wrong with the PDB shows that the authorities have no intention of sharing with the public the department's or shortcomings or exposing anything suggesting its inefficiency.

In the mean time common people have given free rein to all sorts of wild imagination, none of which being on target or charitable. The chairman of the PDB has briefed the diplomatic community on Friday about the power situation and has expressed his optimism that the present crisis will soon be over. The question is why the PDB chairman took so much time to go public about the crisis and its possible cure. His sense of obligation shown to the foreign residents in the country is well appreciated but would it not be in the fitness of thing to explain the matter to his countrymen as well? The elaborate presentation, including slide shows — that was made to convince the dignitaries of the PDB's effort could be repeated on the BTV and it would have helped people understand the situation better and avoid needless confusion.

That the power generating plants are old and need urgent repair is understandable. But what is less clear is the authorities' lack of any attempt to bring their houses in order. We have time and again been appealing for doing away with the inherent weakness and irregularities responsible for system loss in power supply. The World Bank and other international donor agencies have refused to fund the much-needed overhaul of the plants and machines because of the maligned system loss. No doubt, the seed of the problem lies within the system. Without making the system right, the problems cannot be solved.

Russia Looks at the Spectre of an 'Islamic Invasion'

by Andrew Wilson

Moves by Crimea to secede from Ukraine and reintegrate into Russia, and Kiev's riposte that it will "use all possible options" against any steps to undermine "Ukraine's territorial integrity," raise the spectre of another civil war in the republics of the former Soviet Union. Moscow has responded cautiously. As Gemini News Service reports, although Russia is taking a more assertive line on security, its immediate concern is with Muslim intentions to the south.

The new Muslim nations



The invasion of the Commonwealth of Independent States by forces serving Islamic fundamentalism — in short, a revival of the Afghan war, which was ended by the Soviet withdrawal five years ago.

The challenge from the East remains in abeyance — but only as long as China, now overtaking Russia in modernisation, is busy with internal economic problems and unlikely to reactivate claims on parts of Kazakhstan.

Potential threats from both are reflected in the new mili-

tary doctrine adopted by the high command and approved by the Russian government last November.

The key part of the doctrine (a document spelling out defence priorities) is a passage stating the need for the armed forces to be able to deal with threatening or destabilising situations in the "near abroad," as Russians call other ex-Soviet republics.

What Moscow wants, and has more or less obtained, is Western recognition of its right and duty to enforce peace in this area — which is

clearly beyond the West's own competence.

With or without Western approval, it intends to protect its interests, which include the well-being of millions of Russian expatriates and of industries vital to the formerly integrated economy.

To implement the doctrine, the Soviet system of military districts is being replaced by so-called strategic forces commands, from which forces can quickly be sent in any direction.

Up to six in number, the new commands will combine ground, air and (where appropriate) naval forces, with the army element consisting of highly mobile airborne or air-portable forces.

At the same time, the overall system of command based on armies and divisions is being replaced by a leaner and more flexible system of corps and brigades.

All of this will necessitate a re-equipment programme, giving helicopters and lighter weapons precedence over tanks, and replacing strategic transport planes lost to other republics in the post-Soviet shake-up.

Not all this can be achieved overnight, if only because of a shortage of money. At present the armed forces have barely the funds to pay for subsis-

tence; procurement of equipment is at a standstill.

In addition, the high command, while recognising new needs, has a lingering attachment to parts of the old structure. Nevertheless, the doctrine and restructuring mark a radical departure.

In the meantime, the "front" against the Islamic invasion is being held by the conservative governments of the four ex-Soviet Central Asian republics — Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The most involved territory is that of Tajikistan, where, on a chessboard of conflicting ethnic and clan loyalties, pro-government forces, helped by neighbouring Uzbekistan, are deployed ahead of the Russian 201st motorised rifle division to stave off attacks by opposition forces from across the Afghan border.

Behind the "rebels," who give their own bitter account of a two-year war killing tens of thousands, Moscow sees the hand of other regional powers. The nearest one, Iran, appears to be less active at the moment. Iranian diplomats speak of an abandonment of "religious imperialism" in favour of pragmatic "new thinking."

There is less doubt about the part played by military in-

structors sent into northern Afghanistan by Pakistan-based Islamist groups including one led by a former head of Pakistan's inter-service intelligence organisation.

The lack of clarity of long-term purpose on the part of the leading actors makes it difficult to construct the kind of scenario used by military planners in such a situation.

But it is easy to understand Russian anxieties about what could happen if the southern "shield" of Central client republics were to fall apart, and Islamic Central Asian governments were to spark moves for secession by the millions of Muslims in Russia itself.

In the Russian Federation, six Muslim-populated republics (Chechnya, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Ingushetia) have already set up national guard formations, and Chechnya and Tatarstan have clearly stated their ambition for independence.

In a recent paper for the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, it was suggested that the unravelling could go even further if as a consequence of military reorganisation, regional commanders with greater autonomy were moved to support the creation of new independent republics, for which there have been proposals in the Urals, Siberia and the Far East.

For the moment, however, that is Beyond even the most powerful crystal ball.

ANDREW WILSON is former defence and Moscow correspondent of the London Observer.

Al-Siyam and the Month of Ramadhan

by Syed Ashraf Ali

The very fact that the Revelation of the holy Quran commenced in the month of Ramadhan, the ninth month in the Arabic year, testifies to the sanctity, serenity and divine importance of this auspicious month.

to do the same.

The holy Prophet (Sm.) introduced Al-Siyam or the Fasting in a new form, in the true spirit of Islam. A Muslim fast is not mere abstention from food and drinks and sex. In Islam, Al-Siyam is something totally different — it stands for an institution for the moral upliftment and spiritual elevation of the human soul. It helps us overcome lust and thereby sets us at the mouth of the road leading to perfection — perfection to be achieved not through self-torture, not through mere abstention from food and drink and sex, but through Tagwa and Tarawwi, contemplation and acts of charity, total restraint on and abstinence from all evil acts and thoughts, all unholy dreams and desires. Tagwa, indeed, is a function of the heart and is a voluntary effort comprising the elements of caution, alertness and fear of Allah. The holy Prophet (Sm.) used to point to his chest saying: "Here is the seat of Tagwa."

The Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah, loves this voluntary effort and attempt at self-restraint by his Banda to such a great extent that the holy Prophet (Sm.) said, "By He in whose hands Muhammad's soul rests, Allah prefers the stench of the mouth of he who fasts to the scent of musk."

Fasting, which the holy Prophet (Sm.) himself described as one of the five pillars of Islam, is divided into two main cate-

gories: (1) The Fard or the Obligatory Fasting and (2) the Tatawwu or the voluntary Fasting. The Fard Fasting comprises the Ramadhan Fasting, the Kaffara or the fasting of atonement and the Nadhr relating to the taking of a vow.

The holy month of Ramadhan, during which Fasting has been made Fard for all Muslims, occupies a unique place in the Islamic Calendar. It is the holy month which has been explicitly described and analysed in the holy Quran. The holy Quran says: "Ramadhan is the (month) in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgement (between right and wrong)". The very fact that the Revelation of the holy Quran commenced in the month of Ramadhan, the ninth month in the Arabic year, testifies to the sanctity, serenity and divine importance of this auspicious month.

"Ramadhan" is derived from the word "Ramz" which means "To burn", "To scorch". The root meaning of "Ramadhan" is excessiveness of heat; the month was so called because "when they changed the names of the months from the ancient language, they named them according to the seasons in which they fell, and this month agreed with the days of excessive heat." Some say that it is one of the names of Allah, but there is no authentic or reliable authority to testify to this claim.

Allah ordains in the holy

Quran: "Whosoever of you is present in this month (the month of Ramadhan) shall fast it, and whosoever is sick or on a journey shall fast an equal number of days later on."

The Fast of Ramadhan commences with the sighting of the new moon and ends when the new moon of the next month of Shawal is seen. The Ramadhan was first prescribed on the second Monday of the month of Shaban in the second year of the Hijra. According to Ibn Kathir, the Muslim Fast went through three stages of development until it reached its present state. When the holy Prophet (Sm.) came to Medina, he used to fast for three days every month in addition to the day of Ashoura, the day on which God delivered Moses and his people from their enemy. According to Ibn Abbas, the holy Prophet (Sm.) said, "He who has already eaten shall abstain the rest of the day, and he who has not, shall fast the day. Today is the day of Ashoura". When the Fast of Ramadhan was prescribed in the second year of the Hijra, the fast on those days was abolished. The holy Prophet (Sm.) said: "The Fast of Ramadhan has abolished every other Fast. But according to Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqua (R. A.) the holy Prophet (Sm.) also said: "Whoever wishes may fast upon it (the day of Ashoura), and whoever wishes may drop it."

The third stage deals with the period of abstinence and indulgence — there were times of abstinence during the night

as well as during the day. When a man had, said his Isha prayers, he was supposed to abstain from Mustirai i.e. food, drink and sex. Moreover, if a man slept (even before saying the Isha prayers) he had to abstain when he awoke. The mere saying of Isha prayers and sleep forced a man into a stage of abstinence for the rest of the night and the following day until sunset. To provide mankind with the much-needed relaxation from the rigidity and hardship, Allah in His infinite Mercy, revealed the verse: "It is lawful for you on the night of the Fast to go unto your wives; they are your garments and you are their garments. Allah knows that ye defraud yourselves therein, so He turns towards you and forgives you. So go unto them and seek what Allah has ordained for you, and eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct from the black thread, then observe the fast till night-fall."

Fasting enjoins, in the eyes of Allah, a grace, a boon, a divine privilege, a glorious opportunity unparalleled by any other act of piety or worship. Al-Siyam does never stand for

self-torture. The holy Quran says: "Allah does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful."

Fasting in the month of Ramadhan, indeed, brings for mankind every year a period of unique divine importance and excellence. According to Al-Bukhari and Muslim, the holy Prophet (Sm.) said: "With the advent of Ramadhan, the portals of Paradise are opened, and the gates of Hell are closed, and the devils are chained. In this month there is one night (Lailat-ul-Qadar) which is worth more than one thousand months". "Whoever fasts during Ramadhan out of faith, seeking no reward, will have all his past sins forgiven". According to Abu Hurayra, he (peace be upon him) also said: "Whoever breaks the fast even for one day in Ramadhan without any legitimate reason, cannot compensate for it by a period of fasting at another time during the year".

No Muslim can fight shy of this glorious opportunity to learn self-restraint, to temper himself in the kiln of Tagwa and receive thereby Allah's glorious Mercy. None among us can afford to forget the Qudsi Hadith (utterances attributed to Allah outside the holy Quran) in which Allah declares: "All the man's work belongs to him. A good deed is repaid from tenfold to seven hundred times". "Fasting", says Allah, "belongs to Me and I repay".

OPINION

Medical Facilities

Kazi M Sakawatullah

This is a personal opinion with good intention and without prejudice to any one. Readers, including concerned professionals and practitioners, may agree or disagree with me or be dismissive about what I am saying. However, they may wish to take cognizance of and give dispassionate thought to the reasoning.

Bangladesh lacks in adequate medical facilities and expertise in all aspects of human ailments. The number of experts and specialists in the relevant areas of medical science is deplorably limited compared to the number of persons needing help. Consequently, treatment by experts is not available to all and is costly. Only the affluent can afford the same, and an increasing number of the affluent go abroad.

Such a vacuous situation is an attraction for medical experts and specialists from abroad and their local associates or contacts who wish to avail themselves of the opportunity to earn money. That is why occasionally specialists from foreign countries come on short professional visits and offer their expertise to as many persons as their rationed time permits. Everyone seeking the expert advice can not get a chance because of the time constraints of the visiting specialists. Those who are lucky to get an opportunity of consultation do not get a second chance, if needed or if complications should arise. How far, such one-time consul-

tation — except in the case of on-the-spot surgery even which requires continued follow-up care, advice and guidance after the departure of the expert — can be helpful? What is likely to happen, if the visiting expert's single-time treatment and advice contradicts those given earlier by a local expert? Immediate outcome is disruption of the existing link with the local expert without the availability of follow-up on the changed treatment. The patient loses confidence in the former local expert who would also most likely not agree to take care again of his estranged patient. One example would suffice to illustrate the dilemma. A lady was severely injured due to a fall by getting compression fracture of D11 — Disc dislocation. The best available treatment in the country by local orthopaedic surgeon was provided and use of corset (sacra-lumbar) belt was prescribed while in movement. Interim follow-up consultations and guidance were also available. There has been a steady but slow improvement. In her eagerness for a quicker recovery, she consulted a visiting expert who disapproved of the already adopted medication, strictly forbade the use of the belt and prescribed different medication. The consequent confusion and the mental predicament of the patient can be easily imagined. The visiting expert left after a week's professional tour. The patient is left to her bewilderment. There are a number of similar examples.

through the gap in the hood, which unfortunately I had not noticed.

We returned immediately looking desperately about us while I began the awful process of remembering what the bag contained: two air tickets, my passport, money, keys etc. Just about everything was in it.

An hour or so later, while we were having lunch, the phone rang and our host, having answered it, returned, and it seemed from his expression that there might be reason for me to hope, but I quickly dismissed it as absurd. He left and I went into the garden to try to think calmly about what would have to be done over the next few days. Suddenly I heard some strange sounds coming from the street. It was the snake charmer passing by, so, welcoming the diversion, we invited him in. Then, after having admired the snake charmer's cobras, our host returned, and with him my shoulder bag — quite incredibly!

This is what had happened. A young girl had seen the bag lying on the ground and had felt uncertain as to what she should do. Eventually, however, she picked it up and took it to her employer, who checked its contents, found the address of where we were staying, and phoned us. He called on us later and I was able to thank him. I thought,

however, that we should also visit the young girl who had found my bag as I felt it was important that we should see one another. So I went to see her, took her photograph, and hope to write to her from time to time. I am sure that all concerned knew just how grateful I was!

Janet Pollock, Margaret Marsh, Dorset, England.

Dhaka Cantonment area

Sir, Dhaka Cantonment was established at its present site during the early fifties. Then it was quite beyond the city limit. After the emergence of Bangladesh, the city expanded rapidly and it is now almost in the middle of the city. Transportation of materials and movement of people across the Cantonment is restricted and now it is causing hardships to the people. We urge the government and members of the parliament to take practical steps either to shift the Cantonment or to ensure easy movement of non-military persons residing in the area. We hope that our brothers in the defence services will cooperate in this matter for greater public benefit.

Z Alam, Mohakhali, Dhaka

To the Editor...

Safe drinking water

Sir, Occurrence of diarrhoeal diseases and deaths from this are a regular phenomenon in our country. Bacteria carrying contaminated water is mainly responsible for the prevalence of this disease.

Tube-well water, which people take as safe water, was also found to be contaminated with dangerous bacteria 'coliform' in various places of the country. Rajshahi and Chittagong environment offices recently examined the samples of drinking water of different localities of the respective divisions and published their report. In tube-well water samples of 15 district headquarters of Chittagong division, 'coliform' bacterial concentration was alarmingly high. Water of Rajshahi division was also found similarly contaminated. Different water samples carried 16 to 300 'coliform' bacteria in each 100m of water.

But according to WHO standards, drinking water must be completely bacteria free. No doubt, for the perennial prevalence of diarrhoeal disease this bacteria plays an important role. It is a matter of regret and shame that there is no arrangement for monitoring the quality of water and caution the people if it is dangerously contaminated. As a result the general public are drinking

the contaminated water considering it safe without any hesitation and subsequently falling victim to the deadly disease.

If we can't ensure safe water to all, the slogan to achieve 'Health for All by the year 2000', will remain a far cry. So, public health must be protected from the threat of contaminated water. So the concerned departments of the government should take proper steps to ensure supply of safe drinking water to every nook and corner of the country at the earliest, as a prime step towards 'Health for all by the year 2000'.

Dr M A Hanif, Halderpara, Brahmanbaria

In Gratitude

Sir, I have just returned from a holiday in Dhaka, and while I was there an event occurred which I would like to share with as many people as possible.

My first ride in a cycle rickshaw began in a mood of gaiety, sunshine and much laughter. We swung around corners with style and dexterity and because I needed both hands free, I put my shoulder bag behind me, resting on the hood. Once we were on the main road, however, it was less bumpy and I put my hand behind just to check. My bag had gone! Clearly it had fallen