

Hebron Massacre Fall-out

The Hebron massacre of the Palestinians, knelt in prayer at a mosque, by a handful of Jewish zealots should serve a grim notice on Yitzhak Rabin's government that it has enemies within who are hell-bent to wreck the Middle East peace process. Just how determined they are in their opposition to Palestinian self-rule or in fact to the whole range of peace initiatives for the region, is amply demonstrated by two glaring facts. The fanatic rapid-fire gunnery killing sixty Palestinians and wounding another 270 occurred in the month of Ramadan and that too in Hebron, a place holy to the Muslims, Christians and Jews alike.

If Yitzhak Rabin's government should fail to contain the saboteurs it might lend itself to all sorts of imputation ranging from a garbed softline thrown behind the scene to the hardliners to gaining a bargaining leverage at any cost with the PLO. There is no way the Tel Aviv government can put down the gruesome murder to the 'deranged act' of an immigrant doctor Baruch Goldstein and wash their hands off it because the Israeli troops were very much outside the mosque on guard duty.

The brazen-faced security breach provides a classic case for investigation, more so because eye witness accounts have pointed to the presence of more gunmen and their firing from 'several directions'. The whole operation looked pre-meditated. What with the death of the obvious killer, it warrants a wide and deep investigation.

It is for Rabin's government to come out clean on the carnage in its entirety at the earliest. Otherwise, naturally, a UN or international probe as demanded by PLO Chief Yasser Arafat and some outraged Muslim countries including Bangladesh should get in motion.

Already, as a backlash of the Hebron tragedy there has been righteous demonstrations against the outrage. The Israeli troops who are supposed to be a part of a joint interim administration with the PLO and, to that extent act as a custodian of law and order now, have themselves killed some Palestinians right after the Hebron massacre.

Against this backdrop, the whole military might of the Israeli government needs to be employed to keep peace on West Bank and the Gaza Strip as part of their obligation to take the Middle East peace process forward. Maintenance of law and order is in Israeli hands now and they cannot give indulgence to the Jewish militants knowing full well that violence at one and breeds extremism at the other. Since the historic Washington Accord both sides are committed to a time-bound implementation of the agreed plan for Palestinian autonomy in the Israeli occupied territories. It is the security issue that has been the major moot point in the PLO-Israeli talks and should there be more of Hebron-like setbacks not only would the peace advance come to a grinding halt, there could also be a return to the pre-accord turmoil. As it is, Israel has already missed the deadline for a military withdrawal from the occupied area by two and a half months and the interim arrangement is yet to be firmly in place.

In his condemnatory note, after the dastardly act, President Clinton has warned of a further 'complication' being added to the difficult work of peace. His fresh overture to have Israel and the PLO resume peace talks in Washington is welcome. But Yitzhak Rabin has to impress the Palestinian leadership with a fresh avowal for peace.

Taking the Fight to Toll Collectors

A running pitched battle was fought between a group of illegal toll collectors and fish vendors of Kawran Bazar on Friday morning. Four to five people sustained injuries and in the face of organised resistance the extortions had to leave the spot without a boot. That the fish sellers have succeeded in overpowering the toll collectors this time is no guarantee for them to repeat the feat again and again. The threat of vengeance will always be there and the fish traders look to be exposed to further armed attacks in future.

Although the police were very prompt to bring the situation under control before the trouble got any worse, there are allegations that earlier complaints about toll collection had failed to move the law enforcers to action. Four youths were arrested in this connection. But the rest and the majority of the gang members — are at large. Now much will depend on how the police look at the issue and the law of the land is made to play its role in the whole affair. For, the Kawran Bazar's fish traders have played their part quite admirably. But even their collective efforts can be of little help unless the law enforcing authority is caring enough to stand on their side.

It is now an old tale that toll collectors have made a hell of the traders' life in the country. Without parting with some of their business fortunes, it is impossible for the businessmen to continue their economic enterprises. Evidently, the murky politics of the country was initially to blame for this cancerous growth of musclemen who play until today pawns at the hands of politicians with lax morals. Today we are just reaping the fruits of the poisonous legacy. But a democratic government can ill afford any concession to these social parasites.

That foreign investors have been swarming Vietnam for placing their money at the service of that country's thrust for industrialisation immediately after its opening up to the world, and Bangladesh on the same token is crying hoarse without attracting much of an investment speaks volumes for the law and order situation in our country. Time and again the armed goons have unleashed a reign of terror from one shopping mall to another whenever their demands for fabulous sums of toll were not met. A few harassed and desperate shopping arcades built up their own vigilante groups to keep the toll collectors at bay. Obviously this is as good as taking the risk of an open confrontation with the miscreants who possess enough fire power.

In the name of defence of their lives and property, people may indeed be forced to take up arms. But this happens only when a society lays over stress on self-defence — as in America — or when the law enforcers fail to do their assigned duty — either deliberately or because of their inability. This is a very dangerous sign. It is the government that should uphold the principle of protecting the innocent against the criminals.

LECTIONS have become costly. People these days talk about campaign costs not only in terms of tens of lakhs but often in terms of crores. It certainly boggles the mind. How are these people, one wonders, going to recover such huge investments? It is only the Election Commission which seems to maintain the fiction of election expenses within the limits set by it. It is considered to be one of those irritating legal requirements that one has to comply with but everyone regards it as nothing more than a formality. Can the politicians, supposed to be dedicated to public service, afford to spend such staggering sums of money for election campaigns? Their zeal for public service must be very compelling indeed! The wise ones would shake their heads at such naive questions. Just the other day a Bengali weekly claimed that at the last general elections most members spent, on average, thirty lakh taka to win their seats. It did not say how much was spent by those who lost. One wonders how many lost because they spent less.

In all fairness to our politicians I must admit that the trend toward higher and higher campaign costs is a global phenomenon. Our politicians are not the only ones to indulge in such lavish display of wealth in seeking public endorsement of their right to serve the country. Many advanced countries including the United States are plagued by it. Of course it is well within the means of such a rich country to finance the campaign costs of presidential aspirants out of public funds but other elective offices are not so well covered. An article in the Washington Post highlighted the seriousness of the issue by posing the questions: "Should middle class and poor people have less power at the ballot box than the wealthy? Should a large number of places in the United States Senate be reserved for million-

A House of Millionaires: Is this the Kind of Parliament We Fought for?

What I would object to is the blatant use of money right at the time of the election. This would be a form of bribery. The practice of vote-buying, in any guise, must be stopped. The difficulty of enforcement makes it more important to create strong public opinion against this corrupt practice.

ers?" Apparently many Americans are worried. Unless we decide that we do not mind if most of our MPs are millionaires, we have to address these questions.

During the last city corporation election the Election Commission had taken a very welcome initiative to cut down the number of posters and get rid of graffiti on walls. Unfortunately, the move came a bit later because by the time the decision was reportedly taken the entire available space on buildings and walls on the main streets had been fully plastered by posters and graffiti. Politicians should note that despite the overwhelming numerical superiority of a particular mayoral candidate in terms of posters and wall writings the voters were not swayed in his favour. It is not only a waste but people are disgusted by its ugliness.

Instead of influencing the voters these wall writings seem to turn them off. Posters in reasonable numbers have a certain value, particularly in the rural constituencies but graffiti do not have any redeeming feature.

The question of campaign cost must be approached in a comprehensive way. Millionaires are also citizens who have every right to seek elective office. What we can aim at is to reduce, as far as feasible, the unfair advantages of a millionaire vis-a-vis a non-millionaire. I realize that it may be difficult to provide a level playing field to all the candidates; the rich will continue to enjoy certain inherent advantages. But we can certainly make an effort to ensure that the latter are not too seri-

ously disadvantaged. It would be in our common interest to agree on a number of reasonable measures, beyond what the Election Commission lays down under existing law, against total domination of the election process by the very rich candidates. Unless it is done, all the political parties will become hostages to the rich. In such a situation only the very rich will dictate the national agenda and the parliament may become an institution of the rich for the rich.

established practice. (Ministers resort to this unfair electioneering with impunity but in this article I am not addressing the possible abuses of power by the government. For the purposes of this article I am assuming that a neutral government would be supervising the election.) Only a rich candidate can afford to go around dishing out money to buy votes in this manner. The candidate who does not command a large sum of cash will appear to the villagers, by

use of money right at the time of the election. This would be a form of bribery. The practice of vote-buying, in any guise, must be stopped. The difficulty of enforcement makes it more important to create strong public opinion against this corrupt practice.

Candidates must hold election meetings and rallies but must they erect expensive gates? The gates are a symbol of wealth and serve no genuine campaign purpose. The plea that these are put up by supporters and not by the candidate should be rejected. Often giant size gates and election symbols are built, probably, to strike terror in the hearts of the opponents. These ostentatious and wasteful practices should be banned and the ban must be rigorously enforced. In fact, strict and impartial enforcement of these rules will reduce the advantage that a rich candidate enjoys over his poor rival.

Admittedly there are many serious practical difficulties in eliminating the advantages of the rich candidate against a poor one. It is illegal to buy votes but it is not so easy to enforce the law. It can be circumvented very easily. For example, an astute and rich candidate can approach the village elders at election time and promise a donation of a large sum of money for a village mosque or a village graveyard or some other worthy cause with a sentimental appeal. It is a clever ploy to side track the law. Whether the money is used for the declared purpose or not, the illegal act of vote buying would be accomplished in the solemn guise of charity! In fact the promise of a contribution to a school, hospital or orphanage is already a well

contrast, to be a misery fellow devoid of religious piety and a generous nature. How can these abuses of wealth be stopped? Clearly such donations should not be decisive factors in determining the fitness or otherwise of a candidate to represent a constituency.

Is it possible to enact a law or strengthen the existing law to ensure that such motivated and fake charity, once the date for election is set, would not be permitted? Donations for a good cause is certainly most welcome and any aspiring candidate can make donations in the years and months before the election. We should encourage the rich aspirants for public recognition to compete with each other in making charitable donations for schools and hospitals; it would set a most healthy trend. What I would object to is the blatant

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ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

So the parties, in my view, will be well advised to get together in their collective self interest.

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Arms Commissions Thrive on Media Omissions

Daya Kishan Thussu writes from London

Three years after the Gulf war (third anniversary of end of Gulf war, Feb 28) the role of Western governments in fuelling the military ambitions of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has been exposed in the media. But why did journalists ignore these questions in the lead up to the war and instead join in the drum-beating? Gemini News Service investigates the tendency to hound information.

Web of weapons: how West secretly armed Saddam



leased official records show that the British government supplied arms to Saddam Hussein's Baathist party for its coup in 1963, also backed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

While the media may be interested now in how the West armed Saddam, they seem to have forgotten how most of them were baying for blood during the lead up to the war in January 1991.

Now journalist Alan Friedman of the London *Financial Times* claims to reveal the 'story behind the world's first global scandal': how the West built up the military might of an ambitious dictator.

In his book, *Spider's Web: Bush, Saddam, Thatcher and the Decade of Deceit*, he argues that oil and money led the West to 'embrace Saddam' and hide the truth from the public.

Friedman writes: "The 1980s were a decade of deceit at the White House and at Downing Street, a period during which accountability to Congress or Parliament was almost completely ignored and the abuse of power became the rule rather than the exception."

He claims that officials in

Reagan's White House directed illegal arms sales to Iraq, including cluster bombs.

Western support for Iraq is

nothing new. Recently re-

leased official records show that the British government supplied arms to Saddam Hussein's Baathist party for its coup in 1963, also backed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

BNL Atlanta became a kind of private banking operation for Saddam Hussein, the heart of what became known as the Iraqgate scandal.

By the end of the 1980s, Washington had approved credit guarantees for agricultural exports to Iraq worth \$5 billion, shipped via Aqaba in Jordan, where grain could be bartered for arms. Huge loans were arranged by the bank to buy equipment from US and European suppliers.

Washington's main ally, Britain, was also deeply involved in arming Iraq's military machine. Violating its own guidelines on arms sales to Iraq, the Thatcher government was helping the Iraqi war effort.

Prime Minister John Major recently appeared before an

independent inquiry into the arms-to-Iraq scandal, which also grilled his predecessor, Margaret Thatcher. Both denied knowledge of the decision to secretly relax guidelines on exports to Iraq, even though both had held key government positions.

The business was truly international. BNL in Rome organised the shipment of nine million anti-personnel mines to Iraq via Singapore on a false end-user certificate. As Friedman asks, did no-one wonder what use they would be to three million Singaporeans?

Like a Cold War farce, in 1986 US agents bought Soviet-made ground-to-ground missiles to send to Iraq as it was "cheaper to get what they needed from the eastern block than provide entirely new systems from America."

In 1989 US officials ex-

plained worries about Baghdad's creditworthiness, as the Iraqi government was by then spending 42 per cent of its \$12 billion annual oil revenues on military imports.

But the lucrative trade in deadly technology did not stop. The book reveals that even as US bombers blasted Iraq, middlemen were meeting with CIA agents and the Iraqi military in Tunis. As one recalls: "Here we were in the middle of Operation Desert Storm and we were offering to sell Saddam's procurement officer a bunch of SAM missiles."

Despite high-minded pronouncements at the end of the war that such arms sales must be stopped, since then the West has sold more than \$45 billion worth of weapons to the Middle East, showing little faith in peace agreements.

Illegal arms dealings have been exposed by independent inquiries in the US and Britain. But it is unlikely that anyone will be brought to book.

The BNL Atlanta trial collapsed at the end of 1993, despite the judge's conclusion that there had been 'a far larger and wider-ranging sophisticated conspiracy that involved BNL Rome and possible large American and foreign corporations of the United States, Britain, Italy and Iraq.'

After seven years of investigation and \$35 million, independent prosecutors concluded that both Presidents Reagan and Bush were fully aware of arms sales to Iran in 1984-86 and of sending the proceeds to right-wing Contra rebels in Nicaragua.

Friedman quotes Howard Teicher, Middle East adviser on the US National Security Council: "...people think the Iran-Contra affair was something strange. It wasn't. It was just the one that went public. It was not at all abnormal."

Is it surprising that so few people understand the causes of conflict in the world's hotspots when the media tells us only after the event? Where are the media stories now on who is arming whom in Angola or Bosnia? Or will the journalists wait to publish their memoirs when it is all over?

The widows and orphans remembering those who died on the road to Basra are still suffering under the UN (read US) imposed sanctions that continue without any legal or moral basis.

And as the Lord Justice Scott inquiry winds on in London, media interest is fizzing out.

"Iraqgate embodies a broader, more systematic abuse of power," concludes Friedman, "one that contributed to the prolonging of the Iran-Iraq war in which one million people died, and to Operation Desert Storm, which cost the lives of tens of thousands of innocent Iraqis."

Biman

Sir, I would like to draw the attention of the authority of Biman Bangladesh Airlines which is the only airline we have in our country.

Meanwhile, we appreciate the government for taking bold initiative for providing more telephone connections. It is sincerely expected that the government will take urgent steps for solving the technical problems of the T & T Board and professional problems of its employees and workers with a view to ensuring smooth telephone services to the subscribers.

There is another important professional problem with the T & T casual workers. It is said that they do not have any well framed out service rule.

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