

The President Laments

President Shahabuddin Ahmed has spoken again last Wednesday. It moved in the familiar ambit of the self-defeating trend in our political culture and the necessity on our leaders' part to break away from this vicious legacy. What the president of the republic, known for his proven ability to tell the truth and put the devil to shame said while dwelling on day's agenda — role of media in good governance — can be hardly overestimated. The acrimonious relationship between the government and the opposition is showing no sign of improvement. In fact, mutual hatred, intolerance seem to have gained in intensity. Nothing, no issue however crucial or exclusively national, is immune to political prejudice and squabble. This is most unfortunate.

Our political leaders are yet to tune their words and actions to the basic tenets of democracy. They must remember no matter how many arrangements we make for people to give their mandate freely and fairly, democracy in practical terms would remain elusive until they commit themselves to the rules of the game. The eminently futile daily exercise which they indulge in to show each other in dim light, even in a crisis situation that the country is currently in due to pervasive, prolonged devastating floods, shows how inveterate this animosity has become. The state figurehead could not have been closer to the truth when he observed that media can help the cause of good governance. Yes, media can do that by setting these prisoners of past — our political behemoths — free. Only after this hostile culture gives way to constructive criticism that good governance can have a strong foothold. Media's role which he so aptly put is like that of a physician. It has to diagnose the ailment that eats at the growth of country in political, moral, economic and social level.

Sadly and generally media has not been living up to the desired role of a watchdog in this country. The long tradition of government control has been the greatest impediment in this respect. Most frustrating in this regard is the lack of constancy and sincerity in the attitude of political parties. They are most convinced about the freedom of media as an essential component in good governance when in the opposition but the moment they go to power they seem to hold diametrically different opinion about the same issue. Unless we are sincere and prepared to learn from mistakes of yesterday, things will never fall in their places. Mind you, the President will not be always there to remind us of our 'shoulds'.

Jails Must Be Humanised

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs is unanimous on the question of reforming the jails and fully implementing the Munim Committee Report. In the first meeting on Wednesday almost all on the committee put in suggestions for improving the conditions in our jails. They were with experience who did not need convincing that our jails were little better than middle age dungeons and badly needed to be humanised.

The Munim Report was submitted more than a decade back. It was as if written in the blood of such jail heroes as Ali Akbar who rebelled in the Khulna jail to demand humane conditions inside the prisons and were killed in droves in a police action. At the time the whole nation felt very seriously the urgency of prison reforms. And look at the sense of urgency of the successive governments!

The most unflinching criminaliser of man is the jail. Its arrangements and conduct are criminal and all its physical aspects breed criminals as much as the stagnant pools breed mosquito. Our penal laws have two aspects. The punishment side is there on the expectation this would inhibit incidence of crime. The other side, carrying out of jail sentences is aimed, theoretically, to improve upon the character of the convict. The jails have been planned to be reformatories. Planned but not practiced. The jails drive criminality deep down the human mind and drives out the soul — through all round degradation and abasement. This must change and soon.

The Jail Code must be amended and updated according to modern ideas of human rights. The facilities must be so built and developed that personal dignity, privacy and taste are not violated. The administering personnel must be made to change their attitude and conduct. The eating, bathing and toilet facilities and arrangements must be radically changed and improved. Health care should be made effective and universal.

Not all improvements can be done from within the walls of the prison. The prosecution and judicial processes remain as outmoded and slow as these were 50 years back. For this reason undertrials far outnumber the convicts in the jails. With all undertrials taken out, the jails would be more commodious and the first requirement of the jails could thus be partially met.

Shun Unilateral Actions

The hitherto unheard of admission by the West Bengal BSF chief M S Rathore that so-called Bangladeshi immigrants were being surreptitiously pushed into our territory in small groups to avoid the gaze and resistance of BDR sends our hackles right up. The casualness with which he told that to the BBC amounts to undermining the seriousness of bilateral relations. And his attributions to their identification as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in different states of India and issuance of a court order in this regard bespeak the same unilateral syndrome that higher authorities in India seem to have been increasingly afflicted by in the recent months.

It appears that not a shred of self-doubt ever crept into their minds to refer the suspected cases to Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi or Deputy High Commission in Calcutta which in turn would have ascertained with the local authorities in Bangladesh whether or not they were our citizens.

Decency demanded that at least the border outposts on the Bangladesh side were approached through a flag meeting before making the move in which case they would have been enabled to trace out their whereabouts in Bangladesh if there were any. If for the argument's sake it is assumed that some of our people had crossed over to India illegally then does it do any credit to the level of vigil maintained on the other side of the border? To be candid, let's not be at the receiving end of a backlash of domestic or electoral politics in India.

We believe that in this case bilateral norms have been thrown to the four winds and, unfortunately, at a time when the two governments have otherwise forged decent equations, and Bangladesh smarts under a natural calamity.

In his book, *Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: "More correctly, the Afghans should be called the Indo-Afghans. They behaved to begin with, as conquerors over a rebellious people and were cruel and harsh. But soon they toned down. India became their home and Delhi their capital. The process of Indianisation was rapid and many of them married women of the country."

The Afghans and the Indians were too close to one another for centuries. Even after the formation of Islamic Pakistan, Kabul had far better relations with New Delhi than Islamabad. As late as the 18-20 September, 1978, when Atal Behari Vajpayee, then foreign minister, visited Kabul the then President Amin told him: "Let us have a secret pact; you take one part of Pakistan and we take the other part." He was referring to the NWFP. Pushtoonism had been an emotional problem for them.

Relations between Afghanistan and India nosedived in 1980 when we sided with the then Soviet Union at the time of invasion of Afghanistan. I recall when I visited Kabul that year. I saw even close friends turning their back on me. They felt betrayed. One remark I heard again and again was: "How could you do so, you have been our friends. I feel I have not been able to win back the Afghans since."

Islamabad made good use of the space we vacated. General Zia-ul-Haq, then the Pakistan chief martial law administrator, opened camps in Pakistan for the Afghan refugees and al-

lowed the Jamaat-I-Islamia, financed by contributions from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, to preach among them and through them in Afghanistan that Muslims belonged to one ummat (brotherhood) and what hurt the Afghans hurt the Pakistanis.

General Zia got his lifetime chance when Washington chose Islamabad as a conduit to send arms and money to mujahideens so as to bleed the then Soviet Union. Pakistan reached their weapons and planned their strategy and warfare. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) coordinated all the activities. New Delhi was nowhere in the picture. Nor did it care to keep contact with any rebel leader even later. One of them, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, then living in Peshawar, complained to me that no Indian, not even an academic, ever tried to meet him.

When Moscow accepted the defeat and withdrew its forces from Afghanistan, Islamabad considered it its own victory, recognising the role of the mujahideen only cursorily. Washington was interested only in humiliating Moscow. The US quitted the moment the Russian soldiers left. Tearing a leaf from the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's book, General Zia, or more so the ISI tried to force Kabul to look towards Islamabad for guidance. This came both as a surprise and a shock to the Afghans, who were looking for

friends, not masters. They had defeated the Soviet Union to be free. They could not accept Pakistan's tutelage.

New Delhi should have taken the initiative at that time to win over the estranged Kabul. But India sat pretty, feeling confident that Afghanistan would ultimately approach it for reconstruction. For that it was too soon. At that time there was no Afghanistan as such. There were only chieftains and commanders. So much so, Kabul's

population. And Moscow was too weak after the cold war to be a serious threat. America's bombing, however violation of the principles of sovereignty is understandable because the parts of Afghanistan under the Taliban have become a sanctuary for terrorists. The presence of training camps in Afghanistan is old news. They were established in 1982-83, near the border of Pakistan in the province of Khost, Afghanistan, as President Clinton's National Security Advisor Sandy Berger has confirmed. CIA and British intelligence built them as training grounds for anti-Soviet war machine. America was then promoting Islamic jihad against Communist kafirs (infidels). Osama Bin Laden, now No 1 on Washington's wanted list, is a mujahid trained by American taxpayers.

Afghanistan in particular and the Afghans in general have never been part of terrorist activities outside their borders. During the 11 years of war against the Soviet Union, there was not even one incident of terrorism against the Soviet nationals outside Afghanistan. Over 1.5 million Afghans and approximately 50,000 Soviet nationals were killed; it all happened inside Afghanistan.

The future scenario does not look bright. Afghanistan may become a centre of terrorists, who will go to any place in the world to destroy or kill. Islam-

abad may encourage them, as it has done in the past, to infiltrate into India, particularly Jammu and Kashmir. An unending proxy war can assume serious proportions. New Delhi may have then very few options left, although it rules out hot pursuit.

In due course, Pakistan will also face the Frankenstein of Talibans it has created. Their society, particularly women, will face the onslaught of fundamentalism. There may be more violence in the country. The Pukhtoonist movement may get another lease of life since the Talibans are themselves Pushtoons. The 1893 Durand line, which separated the NWFP from Afghanistan, has got erased over the years.

However, to imagine that the Talibans are the future rulers of Afghanistan is unreal. They have a limited base and that too among the Pushtoons. Other tribes like the Tajik, the Uzbek and the Hazars are hostile to the Talibans. They will not sit still. They will carry on war.

From whichever way one may look, there is no go from a composite government at Kabul. All tribes have to be participants in the governance. Islamabad as well placed to bring about such a situation. But it does not want to lose its control. This is a shortsighted policy. Whatever it involves and how much time it takes the Afghans will free themselves from outside control. Few people have been more distinctively shaped by their land and tradition than have the Afghans.

Shortsighted Policy

Whatever it involves and how much time it takes the Afghans will free themselves from outside control. Few people have been more distinctively shaped by their land and tradition than have the Afghans.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

writ did not run beyond a few kilometres. India could have helped individual commanders economically and militarily. But it did not want to get involved.

Pakistan was in position to play the role of an honest broker and bring around the defiant table the different tribal chiefs and commanders. But, perhaps, its interest was confined to making Afghanistan part of the territory under its influence; it wanted to convert the defiant Afghanistan into a satellite.

For years, Islamabad had nurtured Hikmatyar, a Pushtoo, and a fundamentalist. But when Pakistan wanted to induct him in Afghanistan, it

helped them group, train and arm. It is an open secret that the Pakistan army backed them and at times fought by their side. Benazir Bhutto's Interior Minister Naseerullah Babar and ISI chief Hamid Gul are the creators of the Taliban force.

India woke up to the presence of Taliban too late. It sensed the danger when a few of them went to Kashmir to fight by the side of militants. It did little to help the opponents on the plea it had no land route to Afghanistan. In the end, the Taliban, under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, did visit Teheran to have closer ties with Iran and some Central Asian countries. But things did not go far. Iran was interested only in the Shia

Entangled in Strategic Dilemma

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Political analysts believe that Pakistan does not and cannot afford to annoy its old ally the US, in particular at a time when it is going through the crippling effects of economic sanctions after its detonation of nuclear devices in May last. At the same time Pakistan cannot endanger its relations with the Talibans in Afghanistan.

were trained by orthodox Islamic groups Harakat-e-Islami Al-Mujahiddin and Jamiat ul-Islami in Pakistan. It is alleged that the Taliban movement was the "brain child" of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) which appears to be in some ways a progeny of America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The Talibans vowed to create the world's "purest Islamic State" in Afghanistan. Reports suggest that there is a complete ban on education of girls past the age of nine. In the name of Islam, women are locked in their houses. The draconian laws stunned all Afghanistan's neighbouring countries except Pakistan which was the only country that accorded its recognition to Taliban administration in May last year. Iran is reported to have described the Talibans as "medieval". The Central Asian Republics in the north of Afghanistan feel threatened by the Talibans because of their possible spill-over effect of the militant form of Islam in their territories.

A question is often asked: why does Pakistan support Taliban's Islamic fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan? There are several reasons.

First, observers believe that Pakistan wants to control Afghanistan for its strategic reasons as Afghanistan provides good strategic depth against India. Second, it wants to control the distribution of oil from Central Asian Republics through the pipelines set up across Afghanistan to Pakistan's coast in the Arabian Sea as against the pipelines traversing Iran or Russia. It is reported that an American company UNOCAL has planned to build a US\$2.5 billion pipeline to import gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and beyond (after the military strikes the company is reported to have postponed the plan). Third a section of business people have vested interests in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan because much of Afghanistan's poppy crop is processed in Pakistan and they together with a group of corrupt officials in Pakistan seem to derive huge monetary benefits. Finally, the Talibans have been seen to be a stabilising and unifying force in Afghanistan which is beneficial for Pakistan.

Ramifications of US Military Strikes

Observers believed that Pakistan was exultant when the Talibans were able to defeat the Northern Alliance of anti-Taliban groups and occupied the northern largest city Mazar-i-Sharif. Pakistan's political "dream" appeared to have been almost achieved.

It appears that the "dream" was shattered on 7 August when a group of Islamic militants carried out the bombings at the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. The US investigators, after questioning one Palestinian Arab Mohammad

Sadiq Odeh (34) who was deported to Nairobi by Pakistan after his arrest on his arrival in Pakistan on 14 August from Nairobi for travelling on a fake Yemeni passport, claimed that they had "convincing" evidence at hand that the Saudi dissident millionaire Osama bin Laden (41) was behind the bombings of the US embassies. The US launched on 21 August military strikes on the "terrorist targets" of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. The US action appears to be not only retaliatory but seeks to wage a long-drawn war against terrorism.

Talibans in Afghanistan were angry and condemned the attack. Taliban Chief Mullah Omar considered the attack as a demonstration of "enmity for the Afghan people." Pakistan joined the chorus of protest to the US action on the ground that the missile attack was a violation of its airspace. Pakistan could not remain silent when Taliban-controlled Afghanistan was attacked and it had to demonstrate its support to the Talibans.

Many are now pointing fingers to Pakistan for allowing the Osama groups to indulge in the terrorist activities in the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a land-locked country and its access to the outside world is either through Iran or Pakistan or through Central Asian Republics. Some may argue that Mr. Osama bin Laden or his militant followers could go in or out of Afghanistan either through Iran or Pakistan or the Central Asian Republics. Given Taliban-controlled Afghanistan's strained relations with Iran and the Central Asian Republics, the only logical conclusion appears to be that the militant followers of Mr. Osama Bin Laden must have crossed Pakistan territory to move in or out of Afghanistan.

Where was the Pakistani Intelligence Agency (ISI) to monitor their movements? Did the ISI know nothing of their activities in Afghanistan? These are the anxious questions asked by the international community about Pakistan's perceived connivance or acquiescence to running of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan.

Strategic Dilemma

Pakistan appears now to be left with acute strategic dilemmas. Political analysts believe that Pakistan does not and cannot afford to annoy its old ally the US, in particular at a time when Pakistan is going through the crippling effects of economic sanctions after its detonation of nuclear devices in May last. At the same time Pakistan cannot endanger its relations with the Talibans in Afghanistan. Further at this point of time, Pakistan's efforts are likely to get the Talibans off the hook from the wrath of the US.

One of the purposes of Pakistan's protest to the US regarding its violation of Pakistan's airspace seems to satisfy the Islamic groups in Pakistan. It does not wish to be seen within Pakistan and Afghanistan as a supporter of US actions against Muslim militants in Afghanistan. The Pakistani authorities permitted the Islamic groups or parties to stage demonstrations in the streets against the US action. At the same time Pakistan appears to be counselling the Talibans not to allow Osama groups to carry on terrorist training camps in Afghanistan.

It is reported that the Chief Mullah Omar of Taliban declared that the activities of Osama and his followers would be reined in. Taliban Chief did not approve the purported statement made by Mr. Osama following the attack that the war against the US had just begun. Further it is reported that Mr. Osama Bin Laden promised to Mullah Omar that he would not carry any further terrorist or political activities while he lives in Afghanistan. The counselling by Pakistan appears to have worked.

Mr. Osama Bin Laden is con-

sidered as a "guest" of Talibans who found him living in the country at the time when Talibans captured Kabul. Taliban's defence is that they have not allowed him to take refuge in Afghanistan when Mr. Osama had to leave Sudan in 1996. Talibans are now expected to ensure that Mr. Osama should not be allowed to abuse the privileges of a "guest".

Another disturbing concern appears to be that Pakistan's support to Talibans may have encouraged the Islamic groups within Pakistan to turn the country into an Islamic fundamentalist one. A few observers maintain that the country has become a fertile ground for "Islamic revolution". This phenomenon appears to be alarming to the West as Pakistan is now a nuclear-weapons state. If Pakistan turns out to be an Islamic fundamentalist country with nuclear capability, the consequences in the region and worldwide would be unforeseen and far-reaching leading the existing nuclear power equation into chaos. For that reason alone, the US appears to be dealing softly with Pakistan in respect of its attitude towards Talibans in Afghanistan.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Geneva.

OPINION

For a Good Cause

Munira Khan

While congratulating Sam-milito Nari Shamaj for its programme to mark the "Violence against women resistance day" I was thinking about violence in a bigger and wider perspective and found the correctness of the proverb 'might is right' in very sphere of our lives. As conscious citizens of the world we try to strengthen our efforts to eliminate violence against any section of people. But what happens? In most of the cases, socially, nationally and internationally stronger sections victimise the weaker ones through terrorism, atrocities in many forms.

Internationally, a mighty nation can give many reasons for and get many allies to support its killing of innocent people for reasons of their fault and involvement in any crime because of its supremacy in all areas of power. Nationally, the law enforcing agencies can get away with all kinds of cruelties and atrocities (if they want) on the section of people who are weak and have no backing from the stronger section of the society; while the perpetrators have enough power to enforce their will. They can evade law (if they want) in many ways to avoid the legal action which is supposed to be applicable to all citizens as they are 'equal in the eyes of law'.

We may raise slogans, arrange rallies, give statements on the violence against women and children like cases of Yasmeen, Seema, Tania and many many others, but what happens? Do they get justice from the authority? How long it takes to hold a trial and give punishment to the wrong doers? Who will decide that? Most of the cases are manipulated, delayed in trial and ultimately no effective, proper measures are generally taken to correct the procedures and punish the culprits.

Something happens with other cases of terrorism in the society. When the students are terrorising the teachers in colleges, in universities; when local mastans are extorting money from small shopkeepers, contractors, businessmen, or from somebody who wants to

build a house to live in modest way; when extortionists attack and injure humble individuals for snatching money — what happens? Absolutely nothing except almost printing of a report on the incident in a newspaper. May be in some cases some political leaders visit the victim in hospital or at his/her residence (if it suits their political purpose), but that's all.

Who is responsible for all these acts of terrorism? Is it poverty, unemployment, greed, lust and lack of values? I think it is not entirely correct, we were always poor, we had always the problem of unemployment, people all over the world have a desire to be rich and comfortable; some people are always beastly in nature, rape and murder are not uncommon even in developed countries. What we lack most is accountability and implementation and enforcement of the rule of law correctly and judiciously.

In fact, none of us is accountable to any responsible quarter. Husbands are not accountable to anybody for any oppression or violence against their wives, parents are not accountable to anyone if they send their small children to work or beg instead of sending them to school, whereas a simple telephone call from an aggrieved wife of a child will compel the authority to take action against the husband or a parent immediately in western countries. The government officers who are supposed to serve the public are not at all accountable to them for not discharging their duties properly and timely. Above all, the members of parliament voted by the people to represent them in the assembly are not at all accountable to the voters in real sense. Who can raise their voices against any mighty MP? But how many MPs are concerned with the woes of the people of their constituencies in this wretched situation of flood?

The politicians either in power or in opposition can supply arms to their cadres, as they are not accountable to

To the Editor...

Sylhet roads

Sir, Most of the major highways of Sylhet Division beggar description. Sylhet-Zakigonj road and Sylhet-Tamabil road leading to Indian border are in extremely bad shape. In these areas road communication is the only means of transport. Do not give high significance. Roads and Highways Department is paying no attention at all for the maintenance of these vitally important roads. Reason of apathy of this department is not understood.

I demand to the Communi-

tion Ministry to rise to the occasion and do something to mitigate the sufferings of the poor tax-payers who are left at their mercy.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka.

Clinton's confession

Sir, President Clinton has admitted to have improper relationship with Monica Lewinsky. He is the first president of the world to do so. Why was he compelled to do so is hard to understand.

Sex is a very common activ-

ity. Americans enjoy free sex, and many of them live together. In England there is a saying, "King can make no mistakes." I do not know what they say about queens and princess. But Princess Diana admitted adultery and still she is the most popular princess.

Therefore harassing Presidents with Iran for such an affair does not seem justified. Rather Ms Lewinsky who divulged the secret should be punished for breach of trust.

A. F. M. Moenuul Islam
Chandgaon RA, Chittagong