

Taking the Challenge of New Millennium

Strong anti-terrorist agenda needed

When terrorists freely choose the time and place of their strikes, law and order is in an ominous jeopardy. Dastardly open-air mayhem has been experienced one time too many within a time-span of less than three weeks. Only 19 days ago it was JSD leader Kazi Aref and his associates who fell prey in broad daylight to murderous political gangsterism in Kushtia and now the time-bomber massacre of cultural enthusiasts in Jessore comes making a cruel joke of what remains of law and order.

No statement however strongly made in condemnatory words can adequately deprecate the heinous act of cowardice by the planters of the special-device bombs and their masked mentors. Nor can our condolences prove equal to the sense of loss suffered at the death and injuries inflicted upon innocent souls in droves as if they were on the death row of a cannibalistic slaughter-house.

Stock reactions have hardly helped matters. The expressions of outrage and shock, the emotive motions gone through, the giving of names and labels to suspected killers are not to be placed in the same category of reactions though. For, some of these are justified human feelings while the others like the finger-pointing exercise is not merely speculative but could also deflect us from getting at the truth and pin-pointing the real culprit. Yes, a common ideological thread may have run through the attempted attack on poet Shamsur Rahman and the blood-spilling onslaught on the Udichi cultural function in Jessore, but it is of utmost necessity that we regard terrorists as terrorists, pure and simple; not as people belonging to this party or that party.

Such name-calling has a way of creating a false impression that the story behind the story has been cracked open. It will be worthwhile instead to test the theory that some people may be up to destabilising the country.

But we need to get the basics right. As in the case of Aref, so also here in Jessore the organisers had purportedly asked for police presence on the last day of the cultural function. Why was this denied? Importantly, why could not the police intelligence network perform at all? It was a police failure whose ultimate responsibility lands on the doorsteps of the Home Minister. The lukewarm manner in which the low intensity terrorism had been handled in the past has now recoiled as a full-size anarchy. It is now far too serious, far too severe for finger-pointing and recriminatory statements.

The anti-terrorism agenda has to be addressed with political farsight transcending party lines because it will be in the equal interest of both sides to combat the Frankenstein.

Ban on Two-Stroke Engines

The government decision to ban imports of two-stroke automobiles like tempos and autorickshaws and their spare parts is commendable. What is not commendable, however, is its staggered plan to prohibit movement of these 'mobile environmental hazards' in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna in phases over the next five years. It simply defies logic.

Indeed, transition from the lead-spewing vehicles to something eco-friendly, and, more importantly, rehabilitation of some 50,000 or more registered drivers of autorickshaws and tempos will require time. But the time-frame that has been outlined, to say the least, is much too long drawn out. Given the degree and pace of air pollution (air in the capital already contains more lead than any other metropolis of the world), our environment may not survive that long.

The government reaction to the issue of lead pollution, reflected in the decisions to revive the Eastern Refineries, and slap a ban on import of leaded petrol, and two-stroke engines and their spare parts, has been prompt. Now the country needs speedy execution and strict enforcement. There is no space for rethinking or reconsideration. The government has to find an alternative to the two-stroke vehicles as soon as possible. The battery-operated engines used in Nepal are eco-friendly and can be an option. Once we decide on the replacement, all we need to do is make the tempo and autorickshaw drivers conversant with the new technology.

On many occasions in the past, similar plans were shelved, for one reason or the other. We earnestly hope that the ban on two-stroke engines is neither an attempt to placate the environmentalist nor a commitment the government will conveniently forget to fulfil. We believe it will stick to the task of ensuring pollution-free air for the generations to come to grow up in. More than anything else, we owe it to them.

Robberies Galore

A spate of dacoities in the metropolis last week dented the sense of security among its inhabitants, specially that of the housewives. At least seven such cases have been reported with the notable feature that all of them were committed in broad daylight. The police have been able to arrest a few suspects. The chain of dacoities after quite a period of lull has naturally raised many eyebrows. The incidents also raised a few questions in the public mind. The dacoits chose their targets of operation — from dwelling places to show rooms to running buses giving an impression that they have a sway over the city which is unchallenged.

According to the report of an important Bangla daily which described the incidents chronologically, police have also expressed their concern like the citizens have over these acts of robbery. The police suspected that a gang, recently released from the jail, could be behind all these and have arrested some of them. But the sudden high incidence of dacoity in the city has given rise to the general feeling that the law and order situation has taken a further dip resulting in the erosion of public confidence in the police force. This is not at all a healthy sign. The police must act promptly to bring the culprits to book.

THE just concluded D-8 Summit has achieved some remarkable results. In its barely one and a half years existence D-8 has clearly identified goals and the question is now if it can stay the course.

D-8 or Developing-8 is a grouping which stretches three continents from Nigeria in Africa to Indonesia in east Asia and covers a population of 800 million or roughly one seventh of the world population. It should therefore have great potential. Furthermore the area is rich in natural resources, specially oil and gas.

D-8 had an auspicious beginning in Istanbul in June 1997. It groups together Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey. Dhaka meeting was attended by President Suleyman Demirel of Turkey, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, Vice President of Indonesia Hasan Habibi, Foreign Minister of Egypt Amre Moussa, Minister of People's Welfare and Poverty Eradication Hayran Suyo of Indonesia and Minister Plenipotentiary of Nigeria A A Besides Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

Following two days of deliberations the heads of delegation of D-8 adopted what will be known for the next two years as the Dhaka Declaration. In a

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press conference following the launching of the Dhaka Declaration Bangladesh Prime Minister laid great emphasis on the private sector as the engine of development. She announced the creation of the D-8 Business Forum which will meet for the first time in Cairo in April 1999. She spoke about the 'pragmatic and practical' steps which would benefit the people of the D-8 countries. The successful heading of the Summit has been acclaimed by the business leaders, who have confidently predicted that the Summit will help promote investment. In the field of investment to Bangladesh, Malaysia appears to be heading the list since Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad pointed out in his press conference that Malaysian investment in Bangladesh had reached the one billion dollar mark and had the potential of further growth. The Malaysian Prime Minister in refreshing candour spoke about his domestic preoccupations particularly the problem of his now ousted successor Anwar Ibrahim.

Sheikh Hasina told in her press conference that the Summit had entrusted her as Chairperson of D-8 that she would take the initiative to inform other international bodies and groupings particularly

the G-8 of the views of the new organisation. The newly elected Chairperson of D-8 highlighting some of the areas which have made definitive progress stated that Egypt will shortly host the first meeting of economic experts in April this year. Turkey has taken the initiative to build an agricultural aircraft, Bangladesh and Egypt will jointly implement a project on rural industrialisation, Iran

though D-8 comprises of members belonging to the largest Islamic group OIC, so far there is no organic link between the two. Sheikh Hasina in her remark pointed out that the two organisations were complementary. The truth of the matter is that over the years of its existence since 1969, OIC has become ponderous. It is in order to catch up with the new millennium, which is about to

get oriented group. Countries have been given the specific task in particular field and will have to prove if they can meet the target.

By all accounts the second D-8 Summit has been successfully staged. Host Bangladesh has earned high marks for a remarkable performance. D-8 is in its infancy and will have to be nurtured on its path to progress. It has taken a huge challenge — the challenge of a new millennium fraught with pitfalls. It is a hard race against time.

The D-8 guests had a first-hand contact with a part of the bitter history of Bangladesh. They visited the Bangabandhu Museum, which houses — Oh! how many memories of the founder of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation. The visit will no doubt inspire the leaders to go a little deeper in the history of this nation and its valiant struggle for independence under the superb leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It is apt that all this was happening in the month of March, our glorious month for the launching of the final phase of our Liberation struggle.

Suleyman Demirel, the President of Turkey turned the occasion to a fruitful bilateral



The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

is organising the industrial and technological data bank. Malaysia is taking the lead in Islamic Insurance and reinsurance, Pakistan will take care of fisheries and Indonesia, poverty alleviation and energy sector. She pointed out that trade between the D-8 countries stood at a lowly 4 per cent and offered a great potential for growth. Responding to a question she stated that there was no contradiction between the OIC (Organisation of Islamic States of 57 countries) and the D-8. It is noteworthy that al-

dawn, that the D-8 has appeared on the scene to accelerate growth.

The most remarkable aspect of the D-8 is its totally apolitical nature. Indeed there is no scope for politics since geographically it covers Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Islam is the common faith but is not overly emphasised. Indeed at the time of its birth it was called M-8 meaning Muslim-8 and was later changed to the non-religious appellation D-8.

Another very important aspect of the D-8 is that it is a tar-

Neither Here Nor There, Theirs is an Endless Ordeal

Mr Sharif has always been sympathetic towards these people. His efforts during his previous tenure as the prime minister to take back these people, popularly known as Bihari Muslims, was appreciated worldwide. However, this time around, some of his comments suggest somewhat a shift from his previous position, even though he still appears favourably disposed towards repatriation of these people.

THE issue of repatriation of the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh has drawn fresh attention following certain remarks made by Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was in the capital recently for the D-8 summit. Mr Sharif has always been sympathetic towards these people. His efforts during his previous tenure as the prime minister to take back these people, popularly known as Bihari Muslims, was appreciated worldwide. However, this time around, some of his comments suggest somewhat a shift from his previous position, even though he still appears favourably disposed towards repatriation of these people.

More than 230,000 stranded Pakistanis are living in about 60 camps at different places across the country — the majority of them being in the capital and the northern region — ever since

Gafour, the diplomat-turned politician Syed Sahabuddin and young Congress leader Tariq Faruk are among them. Muslims coming from India settled down in various places in the former East Pakistan but the War of Liberation in 1971 put them on a slippery ground.

The partition of the sub-continent in 1947 shattered the social fabric as a large number of people in many areas had to leave their ancestral homes as a sequel to the new arrangements and looked for shelter and identity. For the Bihari Muslims. It was nightmare revisited.

The issue of their repatriation has been a matter of bilateral discussions between Bangladesh and Pakistan at different levels from time to time. However, little

humanitarian magnitude?

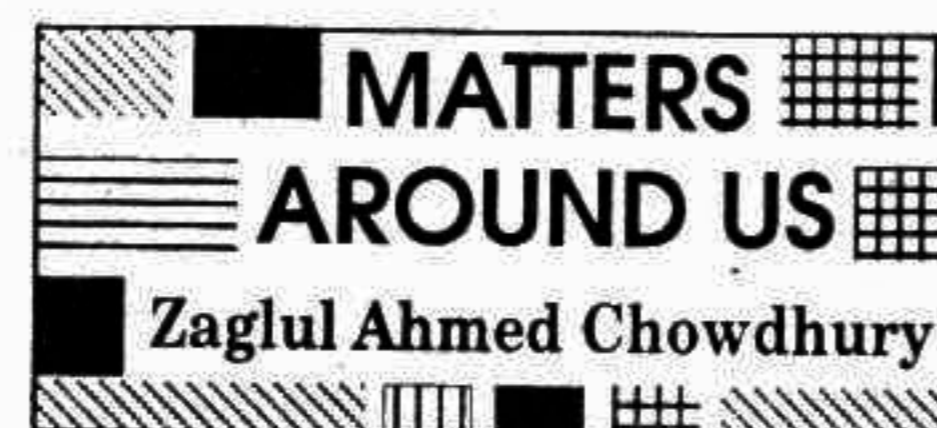
Mr Sharif made efforts during his first term as the prime minister to mobilise funds for their repatriation and a handful of families were taken to Pakistan as a symbolic resumption of repatriation. His removal from office dealt a blow to the process. Several organisations — notably the Jeddah-based Rabitat — were involved in the funding process but the amount required is quite big.

This time at Dhaka, once again he has expressed his willingness to take them back and stressed on the fund. The prime minister said nearly 1000 houses have been made for them in Punjab province but their rehabilitation needs huge amount of money. However, the prime minister this time sought to describe them as not stranded Pakistanis whereas earlier he did not appear to be against such expression. Mr Sharif said it was

a humanitarian issue which needs to be tackled from that point of view. Fact remains that these people are Pakistanis since they have opted for that country.

Anyway, differences in terminology are not important and what is desirable that progress towards their repatriation should be accelerated and no efforts should be spared in that direction from all relevant quarters. Meanwhile, the stranded Pakistanis here are also divided into Nasim Khan and Elaz Siddiqui groups — the former is hell-bent on early repatriation while the latter now favours Bangladeshi citizenship to most of their members. Many of these people have already mingled with the local people but those want to proceed to Pakistan should be helped to fulfil their dream.

After all, this is a big humanitarian problem and international organisations should also come forward to help repatriate these people and their settlement. In Pakistan, notwithstanding opposition from such politicians who are against it for their political exigencies.



Zafar Ahmed Chowdhury

headway could be made on issue although Pakistan did not as such objected to the repatriation. But not all the Pakistan leaders are in agreement.

Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto is lukewarm to the repatriation issue compared to the eagerness demonstrated by Mr Sharif. She played down the issue when she came to Bangladesh. She reacted rather angrily at a press conference during the Commonwealth heads of government conference in Kuala Lumpur in 1988 when newsmen from Bangladesh wanted to know about the progress in the repatriation. 'They are not Pakistanis. Why do you call them stranded Pakistanis?' she asked. Benazir, who is now in India, is understandably worried about the presence of these people in Karachi, Hyderabad and other places in India where such people from India known as the mohajirs are already at loggerheads with the local people. She is apprehensive about the ethnic imbalance in India and hence possibly opposed to repatriation. But how can she turn a blind eye to such a problem of enormous

Rooting for Peace: The View from Karachi

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

India and Pakistan should offer to suspend their nuclear weapons and missiles programmes for, say, five years during which the recognised nuclear weapons-states negotiate weapons reduction by 50, 70, 90 per cent... This would be the best way of rolling back some of the damage we have inflicted upon ourselves and upon the global disarmament agenda, and of contributing to the elimination of these horror weapons.

MANY Indians can only think of Pakistan in stereotypes. They believe it is a society on the way to Talibanisation, in which it is impossible for people to conceive of peaceful co-existence with India. In 'Islamic' Pakistan, there can be no voices of dissent from the Left, unlike from the Islamic-religious Right.

The pro-Bomb consensus in Pakistan, many believe, is virtually complete. The Pakistan peace movement, essentially comprises, crazies and fringe elements. The truth is starkly different. Going by the February 27-28 Pakistan Peace Conference in Karachi, there is a significant and growing peace movement with deep roots in civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). We in India should draw inspiration from the 500 delegate-strong conference-the biggest such convention in the sub-continent since May last. The Pakistan peace movement was not born yesterday.

There has been a lot of peace activism in that country since the mid-1990s. Pakistan witnessed a strong campaign against nuclear testing after May 11, when India crossed the threshold. It takes moral courage to demand restraint when most politicians and strategic 'experts' not to speak of mullahs, bay for nuclear tests as Pakistan's 'answer' to India's 'provocation'. It is not easy to become a peacenik when that means you could lose your job. And yet Pakistani peace activists demonstrated just such courage.

They had to face not just heckling, but physical assault by Jamat-i-Islami youth. The people of Baluchistan (where Chagai is located) too made a major early contribution to the anti-nuclear sentiment. So powerful was this sentiment in that province that chief minister Akhtar Mengal did what few Indian and Pakistani politicians do: resign on an issue of principle.

The Chagai tests involved terrible human rights violations and health effects. As an activist puts it: 'the poor people of Chagai turned pale soon after the pearl-black mountain Raschoh turned white.' Those who were displaced have not been resettled. The Chagai experience, like

Pokharan, calls for independent investigation and monitoring of health and the environment. The Pakistan peace movement has pooled together people from remarkably different backgrounds: scientists and feminists, human rights activists and development NGOs, trade unionists and artists.

The Karachi conference featured several cultural events, including sufi dances, plays, poetry recitals and the mystical-pop group, 'Junoon', which performed before public appearances. The emphasis was on plurality, secularism, democracy, equity and peace.

As in India, the Pakistan movement too has a broad, holistic perspective, and sees nuclear weapons as part of a larger social, political, military and scientific system. But it does not ignore their specific technological and material aspects. Thus, the conference resolution emphasises restraint measures, including military spending cuts, and a commitment not to use nuclear weapons first (no-first-use, NFU). It also set up two alternative commissions comprising experts and citizens: on security, and ethnic minorities.

It is possible to disagree with some formulations of this resolution — e.g. the emphasis on an NFU commitment, a token gesture India has made. Such unilateral commitments are non-binding unless translated into treaties. They can be just as easily rescinded as they are made, as Russia did.

Second, under international law, they can be overruled in 'the supreme national interest'. And third, for military leaders brought up on a doctrinal diet of surprise and pre-emptive use of weapons, it is hard to believe in NFU. Many Pakistani generals also argue that nuclear weapons alone can prevent the rout of Pakistan's conventional forces by India, with its 3:1 superiority. The argument is of dubious value. The first use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan against India will probably provoke massive retaliation. This would be suicidal for Pakistan. A first strike can only be profoundly irrational.

However, the anti-NFU argument does carry some weight

with. He offered concrete assistance towards our efforts to mitigate the damages done by the floods of 1998. He invited President Shahabuddin Ahmed and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to visit Turkey. He stated that the present level of economic and commercial relations did not reflect the 'real potential of the two countries'. He added 'our two peoples are like brothers. You admire Kemal Ataturk and we know about Kazi Nazrul, the rebel poet. I read a piece of his poem in the parliament'.

D-8 is in its teething stage. Yet she is faced with a hard competition in the world. And she has to face her target in a world where competition in the economic field is fierce. What D-8 needs without delay is a Secretariat, an essential tool for work. So far it has been managed from a beautiful building provided by the Turkish Government in Istanbul. It is strictly a one man show as it is run by that brilliant Turkish Diplomat Ambassador Ayhan Kamel. His organisation needs surely beefing up.

During the next two years that Sheikh Hasina will steer D-8, people around the world will wait expectantly that she carries the ideas emanating from the Dhaka Summit to its logical goal of implementation of some of the projects placed on the table. It has been a business like Summit and will be judged by concrete results.

material out of currently being negotiated into a 'framework agreement' whereby those who produce or stockpile weapons — usable nuclear materials have to report every year what they have done to cut stockpiles. Such an FMCT, which involves frequent negotiations on further reductions, could fuse well into a nuclear weapons (abolition) convention.

Above all, India and Pakistan should offer to suspend their nuclear weapons and missiles programmes for, say, five years during which the recognised nuclear weapons-states negotiate weapons reduction by 50, 70, 90 per cent... This would be the best way of rolling back some of the damage we have inflicted upon ourselves and upon the global disarmament agenda, and of contributing to the elimination of these horror weapons. Such major policy changes will come about through state-level initiatives alone. They will necessarily require citizens' action and NGO campaigning, leading to shifts in public opinion. No great or epochal evil in history, such as colonialism or racism, has been abolished without popular mobilisation. Nuclear weapons are just such an evil. Their eradication too will need citizen-level action.

This is no utopian. After all, only a year ago, the demand by peace NGOs for normalised Indo-Pakistan relations was declared unrealistic. But Mr Vajpayee's Lahore visit made it part of the official agenda. Ideal solutions can only come about through realistic small steps. But that is no reason why we must not believe in ideals. Without them, life itself would be meaningless.

OPINION

The Other Side of Hartal

Dr. Sabrina Q Rashid

Hartals have now become a part and parcel of our lives. So let's just live with it! Because in a third world country like ours this is the only way to nurture democracy, though a very coarse and primitive way of course. What else the opposition can do to be heard? They are not listened to or even given a proper chance to talk in the parliament, their demands are never heard or accepted in matters of running the government. So what else can they do but call hartal and try to be heard?

The same thing was done by all previous governments. In fact those who called for hartals in the past always got the booty of winning the subsequent election! So it is we, the general public, who rewarded them for calling hartals and breaking the backbone of our economy! Instead of punishing them we rewarded them with power and position. So now we will have to pay the price by hartals piled upon us!

Hartals once a while are not so bad. Unlike the normal days in Dhaka you are woken up on a hartal day, by the sweet twittering of the early morning birds. It is a wonderful way to wake up compared to the noise of the screaming vehicles. Then there is the pin drop silence. It is very peaceful and quiet, as if you are in another world, far far away from the maddening crowd of this mega city! In which other big city can you ever have this feeling? The environment too is clean and fresh.

No exhaust fume from vehicles or factories, so no pollution. Then since you are nearly locked up at home so you have no other choice but to get close to your family, talk with them, share their thoughts and anxieties, know them — for the children are ever changing while growing up, discover them all anew! As life gets so busy that one hardly gets time to spare for one's near and dear ones. You

can even discover yourself! You get some time to spend just with your own thoughts, which is indeed rare these days.

These days everybody is too busy to make as much money as possible. Hartal puts a brake to this craze. But of course for poor people and day labourers hartal means a day without their bread. Which is very wrong and unfair. In case of a medical emergency hartal is nothing short of a life threat and very unfortunate for the ill. In some western cities they have fixed a day in a week when no cars are allowed in towns to control the air pollution. Our hartals automatically serve that purpose! Hartals weren't all that alarming and dangerous before. But now the roads turn into battlefields. This idea of anti-hartal is very new but it isn't helping much, it is rather making the situation more volatile.

The most dangerous thing about these anti-and pro-hartal factions is, it starts a fight amongst ourselves. So we Bangladeshis are now fighting each other.