

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, April 2, 1999

Playing With Fire

Political terrorism is dangerously on the rise. Headlines in the newspapers reappearing after three-day-long Eid holidays speak of it. Our paper screams: "Rivals slaughter two Naogaon AL leaders." Prominent Bangla dailies blare out: "18 killed in Eid holidays: two AL leaders beheaded in Naogaon; 9 pre-planned murders in three days; Extremist group sets a village in Jhenaidah afire as four die, so on and so forth."

This is evidently no ordinary-type political violence we are confronted with today. Armed political clashes and targeted murders of political rivals and cultural organisers have occurred with a religious regularity. The crimes have been on a scale so mind-boggling and of a nature so gung-ho and gory — from Aref in Kushtia through Udichi in Jessore to Advocate Siddiqui Rahman Raja and Arun Kumar Sarkar at Atrai in Naogaon — that a conventional law and order approach must now be deemed to have completely outlived its utility. We are dealing with armed political terrorism that has travelled far beyond the campuses and the narrow confines of political loyalty contests and flare-ups. There were 210 political clashes in the country from January 1, 1998 to January 15, 1999. In Dhaka City alone student organisations had fights that totalled 46, both interneccine and as between student wings. One thousand cars were damaged and more than a hundred vehicles torched including 26 belonging to the police force. It is no longer knifing or stabbing kind of murders; what we see instead is the use of sophisticated weapons in broad daylight and cold blood. The murders are plotted, engineered and executed with a professional skill that could only be on hire from trained killers. So, we have this new facet of terrorism aspect to bear in mind aside from the off-reported trafficking of variegated arms and ammunition into the country. Are we going to be ruled by the Mafia?

This hydra-headed monster of socio-political terrorism that seems set to destroy everything around us cannot be tackled so long as the political parties, blinded by their one-point agenda to pull each other down, harbour and shelter criminal elements as musclepower at their beck and call. These pampered youths forage on the confrontational and highly polarised political pastures. When they are caught in the act, influence-peddling will start and they might have to be released as quickly as they had been hauled up. But if the police should decide to pursue a case, the culprit might slip through some legal loopholes or as a result of inadequate police investigation. The Inspector General of Police has despaired of accused being set on bail and returning to their criminal ways, with renewed vigour.

So, we have to do something about the sheltering of terrorists by major political parties and the inadequacies of the law enforcement system of which the police and the magistracy ought to be mutually reinforcing integral parts. It must be remembered by the political parties that if they persist in wooing the terrorists they would not merely be digging their own graves but also jeopardise the country's future beyond repair.

They are much too steeped in a make-believe frame of mind to realise the hard truth that the terrorist elements are chameleons having no fixed political colour and that they are collectively against civilisation, social order and human welfare. They are just out to destroy everything and must, therefore, be frozen on their tracks dead cold.

The terrorist elements are chameleons having no fixed political colour and that they are collectively against civilisation, social order and human welfare. They are just out to destroy everything and must, therefore, be frozen on their tracks dead cold.

Pakistan's Soft Political Underbelly

Syed Talat Hussain writes from Islamabad

Karachi is no New York or LA where crime is a natural consequence of the values crass capitalism promotes and therefore has to be accepted as part of life. Karachi's crime is as un-natural as its criminals who have emerged on the scene of society in the last ten years. Karachi is big and a sprawl and has its vice-spawning slums and bins of corruption. But it is still a city of families and people who want to live in peace.

It was a day when commentators out-did themselves while showering high praise on an under-performing government. It was a day when rhetoric on TV out-noised the 21-gun salute marking beginning of the festivities of the 23rd of March. It was a day when Ghauri and Shaheen missiles went on display, tanks rolled on the roads of Islamabad, jets roared overhead and brave soldiers jumped from 10,000 feet and landed on their feet amidst wild crowd cheers for their parachuting skills. It was on that day that a news mocked all decent souls in the country: it was about the murder of a 17-year-old boy who was executed in public by criminals who had kidnapped him for ransom. The news played big in the print media because the poor teen was the son of a rich man, chairman of Bhoja Airline and came from a well-known and resourceful family.

But it should have played even bigger role for better reasons. In telling the drama surrounding the boy's kidnapping, the suspense of the demand of the kidnappers of 50 million rupees in return for his release, and eventually the tragic climax of his public execution, the news captured all of the most sorry dimension of today's national life: brazen criminals running amuck; helpless citizens with nowhere to go for protection; and worse a system which does not deliver. For the government, there is no shortage of explanations to explain away another parents' loss of a son whose only fault was that he happened to be at the wrong place at the right age. It can blame it on the party of the Urdu-speakers, the MQM, suspected of running ransom mafias in Karachi. It can even blame it on the judicial system which is so slow in dispensing justice that it actually encourages criminals who wreak havoc upon law without any fear of retribution.

Nor is there a famine of sops and exercises in damage-limitation. Condemnations are handy: the president, the prime

minister and exceptionally the chief of army staff have all condemned the murder. This is one way to show that they all care. That they are saddened by what has happened. Enacting the farce of arrests of suspects is another artful tactic: this shows that the government is doing 'something', that it might be, just might be, able to find the killers and make them pay for their horrible misdeed. It is a good deflection to boot. It takes the attention and focus of public and media off from the main event, the murder, and gives them something else to look at the wild goose chase of the police for criminals who left behind few traces. And if all else fails then there are always statements. Good old statements about how much the government is doing to control law and order and how difficult it is to change the system, making it sound as if the government is doing the best it can but the odds it is pitted against are overwhelming. But these are all excuses, lame excuses.

None of these can bring the dead boy back. He is gone for ever, like thousands of others before him who have been consumed by a fire of hate, crime and greed which they did not light. None of these heal the wound of the family which has lost a loved one only because the government could not do what every government in every civilised society is supposed to do for its citizens: provide protection of life, liberties and property. How are those citizens to feel whose rights are badly mangled by powerful crime cartels? What should motivate hundreds of those families scarred by the deaths of their near and dear ones to feel strongly again about the lofty notions of commitment to the land and patriotism when they see that criminals whose hands are stained with innocent blood are not even caught much less brought to justice?

The question would have been an exaggeration of reality if crime was an unstoppable monster, whose onslaught was stronger for even the strongest defences built against it. But it

is not. Karachi's crime and criminals would not have even a quarter as frightening as they are now if the government was serious about reforms rather than be content with showy window-dressings as the Governor's rule in Sindh is proving to be. Karachi is no New York or LA where crime is a natural consequence of the values crass capitalism promotes and therefore has to be accepted as part of life. Karachi's crime is as un-natural as its criminals who have emerged on the scene of society in the last ten years. Karachi is big and a sprawl and has its vice-spawning slums and bins of corruption. But it is still a city of families and people who want to live in peace. Even all those blows it has taken in the past at the hands of gangsters and its governors have not taken life out of it and made it unliveable.

It has the potential to fight the mayhem in its midst eating into its vitals, devouring innocent young men, and to banish the killers from its borders for ever. But that will not and cannot happen on its own. It has not happened through operation clean-ups and governor's rules. It will only happen through reforms and rehabilitation of the police, of the system of civic amenities, of the local administration, of its schools and colleges, of its port and hospitals. The city has to be over-hauled. There is a national emergency there. Will that catch the government's attention? Pakistanis watch and see.

Not for the first time, jockeying and jostling is on for a privileged position in the Pakistan Foreign Office. This time round the coveted prize happens to be the office of Pakistan's Permanent Representative in New York. Until two weeks ago news was hot that the current foreign secretary, Shamshad Ahmad had been able to win the posting in New York to crown a successful career and that the incumbent Representative, Ahmad Kamal, will retire at the end of a job already on a year's extension. Just as strong was the news

that Pakistan's man in China Inamul Haq would replace foreign secretary Shamshad Ahmad. But Ahmad Kamal has apparently pulled a fast one on everyone and using his strong connections in PM's kitchen cabinet has managed to get another year's extension. Sources in the PM secretariat say that Ahmad Kamal has pulled off an impossible one by getting the orders closing his four-year stint in New York reversed in the nick of time. Insiders say that the decision is already taken that Ahmad Kamal will stick around in New York for another year, but no official notification has been issued to this effect. While the Foreign Office on the whole does not know about this turning of tables, the foreign secretary is already in the know of it, sources say.

When contacted on the matter the office of the foreign secretary had no comment to make on the subject. Ahmad Kamal's move throws a long shadow in the works which the foreign secretary Shamshad Ahmad had planned. He apparently had asked for a posting in New York which combined with his stint as foreign secretary would have looked really good on his illustrious CV. Sources say that no one had anticipated that Ahmad Kamal would be able to outplay the foreign secretary who is close to the prime minister and is far more influential than many of his predecessors.

In the smoky realm of Foreign Office's internal politics never is never. Shamshad Ahmad is no push-over and he is very well connected. What remains to be now seen is how he reacts to the checkmating of his plans by Ahmad Kamal, a wily survivor who does not say die and does not believe in quitting or retiring.

Beauty is skin deep. But so is Pakistan's politics which falling standards now include political parties competition and conflict over animal skins. While Ehdul Azha was an occasion for the faithful to fulfil their duty to Allah and his prophet Abraham (PBUH), for

In Search of Planning

Our search for planning through successive five-year plans and one two-year plan did not complete the mission so far. We are still in search of planning in spite of the fact that since the very beginning of powerless plans produced by powerful planning commissions, we have been engaged in an endless pursuit of the black cat in the dark room which is not there. The leading employer of the country is the government with millions under its payroll. Recently government announced that during the current year, half a million new jobs would be created within the government sector. Now this huge army of employees cannot survive on the meager salary alone.

GERMANS are the most thoroughgoing planners in the world. They plan at least three months ahead of the Easter holidays, not only for the feast but also the subsequent rehabilitation phase of the digestive tract. Germans are the masters of detail. They leave nothing to chance. Each and every German usually knows of what is to be done, when and how. The British also believe in planning in order to justify what has already been accomplished. It is a post facto analysis justifying past actions as well as inactions. The Italians have tremendous faith in the underworld, since the world above is replete with regulations, tax inspectors and trade union interventions. It may be recalled that the economic resurgence of the country during 1980s was caused by the sub-surface expansion (which often surfaced out in the open), of the so-called submerged economy.

Individuals reign supreme in the United States. To the Americans, invisible hands of the market are the ultimate determinants of the course of an economy. Planning has no place where market is the supreme arbiter of what must prevail. On the other hand Russians are now at a total loss. They used to believe in total planning. From toothpicks to giant machinery and equipment, they must all be produced and consumed according to pre-determined targets and proportions. The entire system has now collapsed

and markets with their invisible hands cannot be created at a short notice. In fact, the market cannot be created — it must evolve. Probably as a consequence, the supreme leader of the Russian Federation often suffers from bouts of serious illnesses and is rushed to hospitals. Likewise, the Russian economy also suffers from frequent blockage of its vital arteries.

In Bangladesh, we are in search of planning since the early days of our freedom struggle. As soon as Bangladesh came into being, an important feature of the new government was the establishment of a powerful planning ministry. It was divided into several divisions, each one of which was headed by an economist enjoying the rank and status of a Permanent Secretary to the Government. Above the divisions was the Planning Commission consisting of members with the rank of a Minister. The Planning Commission was practically structured as a parallel government.

Unfortunately, the powerful planning commission produced a powerless plan. Up to 1975, the rehabilitation phase and wall overshadowed plan implementation. Thereafter, it was thrown into the trash heap of government waste papers. Left behind, as legacy of the planning commission, were the monster sector corporations where

total losses today have gone up to the staggering amount of nearly Tk. 3,000 crore.

Incredibly enough, the planning machinery created at the time of liberation never stopped working. It went on producing plans, one after the other; and now we have the latest fifth five-year plan, which has been prepared simply because there happens to be a Ministry to produce it. The energetic Minister for

the forbidden fruits of the underground economy.

The leading employer of the country is the government with millions under its payroll. Recently government announced that during the current year, half a million new jobs would be created within the government sector. Now this huge army of employees cannot survive on the meager salary alone. Corruption on a fairly intensive scale adds

where the usual planning exercise can never work.

The small farmers — agriculture is a legitimate above ground activity but remains under reported and therefore, constitute a part of the so-called submerged economy. It is doubtful if planners ever know small changes at remote homesteads and small plots or if they do know policies and programmes to reach them are yet to be devised for the purpose. Poverty alleviation plans in order to reach the submerged sector of the economy, fail to reach the hardcore poor even by the longest barge pole of the expensive (300 dollars per work day) consultant on the subject.

Planning services are difficult for the poor to benefit from. The successful microcredit programme of the Grameen Bank did not result from planning at the top in air-conditioned offices and four-wheel drive jeeps for occasional sorties to villages. It came out of detailed work by the top Manager, sitting in the village hut and spending years in those villages. That is how full proof systems for microcredit operations have been developed.

What do we do with planning then? The crisis-ridden economies of Southeast and East Asia find planning to be utterly useless in the context of open, globalised liberal market economy. We don't since one huge ministry will have nothing else to do. I think the time has come to declare an open-ended hartal on planning and perhaps in this way we can at last find a useful purpose of hartal as well.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

Planning is himself an expert on the subject which unfortunately, is not the case with another important Ministry.

Our search for planning through successive five-year plans and one two-year plan did not complete the mission so far. We are still in search of planning in spite of the fact that since the very beginning of powerless plans produced by powerful planning commissions, we have been engaged in an endless pursuit of the black cat in the dark room which is not there.

Let us accept that we are not Germans. Planning is not our cup of tea. We are definitely not equal to the clever English (proved long time back by the success of the East India Company) who will plan to justify what is not. Most probably, we are close to the Italians with the knack for

and services can be sustained. Planning will be justified if the economy is growing and such growth is the aggregate of the dissimilar rates of growth of the various components of the economy. We are extremely fortunate that some of these components are indeed moving pretty fast.

According to my estimates, the illegal drug and alcohol market; the export trade in human beings, in particular, children and young women; the protection services rendered by mastans; rent collection from a large number of sources — all add up to a huge growth inducing element to the economy. As a result of this, an increasing number of the poor can only survive while a handful of the rich keep growing richer and richer, ever after. Therefore, our faith in the underground economy is indeed very high

Friday Mailbox

Pro-West feelers for SAARC

Sir, The western powers are active in the SAARC region trying to dismantle the psychological barriers, not directly in the interest of the members, but for seamless trade control of the hugely rich potential market of one billion consumers, now busy with development projects. The industrialised countries could comfortably live off the SAARC market during the 21st century.

The bus trips among the three major member-countries are feelers, with more trips in the offing (not drug-induced). The reverse strategy is working in isolating Iraq (and other selected Muslim countries) with genocidal import-export pre-conditions, clearly visible in the listless eyes of the Iraqi children suffering from malnutrition and lack of medical treatment (one HR story in DS Feb 27).

There is a good side to these selfish western efforts. The thaw in the Indo-Pak relations would make the region vibrant with infinite possibilities of a better and more cohesive live pattern. Big India's potentiality would not be eroded suddenly without maintaining a balance with China, the other big nation in Asia (both controlling about two billion people). This see-saw strategic battle might continue for a couple of decades till the situation became manageable globally.

But there are huge disparities in the economic and demographic sizes of the SAARC member-nations, with the big-brother syndrome nagging the smaller countries. The D-8 (which met in Dhaka recently) had to be created for more reasons than one, remembering that statistically, there are more than 360 million Muslims living in the SAARC region. It is a big number which cannot be hidden or ignored. Iran recently offered Bangladesh an EPZ in an off-shore island in the Persian Gulf for trade outlet to the Middle East and the CIS. Malaysia is becoming more outward-looking.

Normalisation of the Indo-Pak relations would transform the economic and development picture of the sub continent, diverting big slices of the defence budgets towards more broad and intensive human-oriented development projects aimed around the poverty line. Bangladesh would also indirectly derive many benefits, opportunities and outlets. India has to treat the other members at peer level to restore the background confidence so vital for playing up the ideals of democracy.

This subcontinent enjoys one historical advantage: the spin-off gained from the experience of the British Raj for 200 years. While the former East Indian Company could become so prosperous in the ancient days without the advantage now enjoyed through the information technology, the conditions now are more modern and adaptable in this age of the global village. Plans and projects do not become ideas — it is the other way round.

The financial environment in the three capitals is in poor state. Pakistan is almost bankrupt; India's position is none to right according to the latest budget announced; and Bangladesh is progressing through jerks and starts as she is suffering from the modern *murgi rog* (hysteria) which goes by the new name of *hataloties* (coined by DS).

The need of the day is mental conditioning for cultivating the correct approach for SAARC to work unitedly and harmoniously as an effective bastion at the global level.

A Husnain Dhaka.

Negligence in duty

Sir, It's amazing that the government (like all past governments) wakes up when any disaster looms, and again, overlooking the causes for such disaster. The news item on the col-

lapse of an electric tower due to excessive extraction of soil by the inmates of a nearby brickfield sounds appalling! During my recent trip to Rajshahi, I have noticed a number of brickfields that have been built in the middle of paddy fields on the way to Paksey. Trail of smokes can be seen from miles away, laying milestones for the upcoming air pollution in the rural areas. If this is not checked in the beginning, aforementioned accidents are not unlikely.

These are not natural disasters — a little effort and regular monitoring can put an end to it. The collapse of multi-storey buildings in the recent history of this country showed the same negligence in duty by the responsible departments. It's useless to point fingers at the opposition, for all the mishaps.

Where are our bureaucrats who are trained to run the government smoothly? Will somebody explain how the government organise their duties?

Zaraazra Dhaka-1207.

"Consumers Cheated"

Sir, This is in reference to the letter of A Zabr (DS 10.2.99) who wanted to know "would it be impolite to ask for an explanation" of CAB (Consumers Association of Bangladesh) as they remained indifferent to the deprivation of the consumers towards the benefit out of devaluation of various currencies.

It's true that the CAB is a body in name only. I haven't seen much activity of the so-called association for the consumers in course of decades of their existence. The question of benefit by devaluation of other currencies is a far cry which in fact is absorbed quietly by the devaluation of our currency. Yet it should have been able to monitor such developments and look after the welfare of the people.

But what about their other basic role to save and protect the interest of the consumers by intercepting invasion of our markets with spurious goods like "bottled mineral" (water) which have been reported to be full of impurities (nomenclature of the water being baffling)? There are number of products marketed even with the 'BST' mark are questionable for their claimed quality and here the CAB proved to be quite a failure.

It's about time to propagate public concern and opinion against cheating of the innocent and unaware consumers and go for a new worthwhile organ.

A F Rahman Dhaka.

"Song-bidhan"

Sir, How the table have turned! Three years back, when the joint opposition demanded caretaker government to preside over general elections, the obstinate government of Khaleda Zia repeated time and time again that the demand has no constitutional basis and thus political movement is unjustified. I heard many people mocking the sudden infatuation of constitution of Khaleda Zia by referring the constitution (Song-bidhan) as song-bidhan. Now again we are observing staunch defenders of constitutions who cite it to mock the opposition. At least for our politicians the constitution is truly a song-bidhan.

Shafiqur Rahman 1/6 Lalmatia, Dhaka.

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.