

### Punish the Hooligans

WE abhor the attack on a newspaper office on Monday and condemn such act of vandalism in the strictest possible terms. At the same time we demand exemplary punishment for those who were responsible for the ugly incident. According to reports a BNP procession came under attack near the Janakantha office and the violence erupted. The processionists reacted. But why attack a newspaper establishment?

We fervently but forcefully appeal to all political parties of the country to protect newspaper and media offices, establishments and journalists from such nefarious attacks in the greater interest of the freedom of the press and flourishing of democratic institutions which are so vital for Bangladesh. Leaders of political parties should motivate their activists to practice restraint, tolerance and respect for the "Fourth Estate" and also for their opponents. These qualities are essential for growth of any democratic society. Media and newspaper establishments are, understandably, sacrosanct and should not be made target of criminal attacks by any political party or its activists. All acts of threat and intimidation to the freedom of the press must be protested and condemned in unequivocal terms and resisted as such. Once the damage is done it is useless to embark on a war of wrong statements and equally inaccurate and false counterstatements. The damage to properties at the Janakantha is enormous. Firing and injuring the newspaper staff, breaking of automobiles and traumatising their passengers can never be accepted. Political parties, specially their leaderships, should be aware and cautious of such elements in or around them as might render more harm than good to their name.

Politics in this country is taking newer dimensions and becoming more acrimonious in nature giving birth to intolerance and violence, none of which is any sign of progress. Every political party has the right to hold peaceful rallies and take out processions and there must not be any intimidation or assault on that either. A situation of attack and counter attack as alleged in the incident in question is no way acceptable in a democracy because it will only lead to the unending process of violence that can seriously disturb public peace and create intense law and order situation.

### Flood Again

END of June this year, the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre's (FFWC) projection that a major deluge is highly unlikely this time around surely had a soothing effect for the country still recovering from last year's prolonged and pervasive flood, the worst of the century. Although its forecast was immediately followed by a breach in the Gumti embankment that left huge areas in Comilla inundated for days together and the Dhaka-Chittagong road-link snapped for hours, flood situation, more or less, did not quite assume cataclysmic proportions at any time this monsoon. However, the danger appears far from over. With at least seven major rivers flowing above their danger levels at 11 points across the country, the bleak prospect of a major deluge cannot quite be ruled out. Low-lying areas in Dhaka and Narayanganj have already been inundated. In all, 18 districts in the country's central and northern region have been affected and the FFWC says more areas may go under water within a day or two.

With the late-monsoon rain hardly showing any sign of letting up either in the upper riparian or in major river basins, situation suddenly looks a lot threatening than the earlier FFWC forecast had us believe. In all probability, the situation may further deteriorate in the next couple of days before turning for the better. Within that period, the flood onslaught will affect more people.

At this point of time, the government and its agencies need to focus primarily on reaching out to the affected people with necessary relief materials. Also, they should ensure adequate supply of medicine lest there be an outbreak of diarrhoeal and other water-borne diseases, quite usual under these circumstances. Later on, there would be the need for an orchestrated effort to rebuild and renovate infrastructure affected by the sudden spate. Encouragingly, the government has a proven track record of ably negotiating with natural disasters. Last year, its timely intervention largely mitigated the impact of the devastating flood. We earnestly believe similar agility and eagerness will be displayed this time around, too.

### A Decision Well Taken

THE cabinet decision on a trust for the teachers at the non-government but registered primary schools across the country certainly speaks of the government's commitment to address an issue conveniently ignored over the years. Although only the first step—the bill has to be approved by the parliament before being enacted—it definitely augurs well for the neglected section of the teaching community. Also, the statutory provisions including retirement benefits, and financial assistance to teachers who become incapable during their tenure and to the families of those who may die from accident while in service, surely attaches an element of security to the hitherto insecure job. In the long run, it will act as an incentive for the teachers, working thereby towards overall improvement of the country's primary education.

However, allocation of funds in this regard, as in other such cases, may breed corruption at different levels and, therefore, accountability and transparency in disbursement must be ensured. Cash accumulated has to reach those who are truly in need of. Also, disbursement procedures should be worked out in such a way as to spare the beneficiaries of the welfare fund of any unnecessary hassle. Good initiatives often prove fruitless, simply because of government inefficiency and lack of commitment. Accessibility to the welfare trust must not resemble the state of the government's pension scheme where it takes years for pensioners to get their due. Trust funds need to be easily accessible while maintaining a strict procedure to prevent fraudulent claims.

While welcoming the decision, we would urge the education ministry to carefully work out the details in this regard. Otherwise, it will just be another initiative good intentioned but fruitless for lack of proper implementation.

# Problems Confront Russian and Chinese Leaderships

**If Russia resorts to brutal force and massive human rights violations to put down the rebellion, the Dagestan conflict may attract the kind of world attention that was directed to other conflicts in other previously obscure and unknown places, such as Bosnia and Kosovo. . .**  
**China often releases political prisoners before the end of their allotted jail terms, so it is very possible that the unlucky 50 Falun Gong leaders will be jailed relatively briefly. Nevertheless, the reprisal was undemocratic. It also draws attention to (and thus may increase the standing of) what had been an obscure organisation.**

AFTER returning from a month-long vacation, it takes some time to get back in the rhythm of everyday life. In the meantime, so many things have happened around the globe. In the international arena, it ranges from a new political and military crises in Russia to another human catastrophe in Turkey. At the domestic level, it ranges from the eviction of slum dwellers in Dhaka to the emotional finger-pointing in the debate over transshipment of Indian goods. I plan to look at each of these issues in the coming weeks. This week's lucky draw goes to the governments of Russia and China.

The Russian government deserves mention for the musical chair being played at the Kremlin and its handling of the Dagestan issue. The priorities of the Chinese government were questioned following its crackdown on a "so-called" spiritual group.

Stability, like democracy, remains an aspiration in Russia, where President Boris Yeltsin has once again upset the rickety apparatus of government by firing his prime minister for the fourth time in the past eighteen months.

Russia has made important strides in recent years, but the bright promise that Yeltsin once represented has been tarnished by scandal, widespread corruption and a personal whim-style of leadership that has too often led to more chaos and instability. And as Russia's economy and government become ever more unstable, the international aid organisations will become ever more leery of making those enormous

loans that have kept the Kremlin afloat. Although the country holds elections, Russia is essentially run by various circles of powerful elite vying with each other not so much for control as for acquisition of wealth and booty. Yeltsin's group in the Kremlin — known as 'The Family' — wants to make sure it stays in control once Yeltsin gives up his throne.

Hence, the selection as prime minister of Vladimir Putin, a 46-year old former KGB spy, known for his loyalty rather than for any special acumen or competence in running a government. He is the eighth person — including Yeltsin, who handled the duties himself in 1991-92 — to do this job since Yeltsin took office in July 1991. The average tenure has been about 14 months.

This is no way to run a government. However, it must be remembered that Russian constitutional government and market economy are still in their infancy in a country that was dominated by communist bureaucrats and ideology for seventy years. That's no small thing to overcome, and the outcome is still in doubt.

Now add to this list of uncertainty, another rebellious region which wants to secede from Russia. Kremlin is now

forced to confront an insurgency that is probably more serious than its leaders are admitting.

If Russia were not as huge and as important as it is, this insurrection in previously obscure Dagestan could be safely ignored by the rest of the world. But since Russia can't be ignored, the dust-up in Dagestan can't be either.

It began on August 7, when

insurgents crossed the border from nearby Chechnya, a breakaway Russian republic, and proclaimed their intent to establish an independent Islamic republic in Dagestan, a region of 2 million people and more than 30 ethnic groups.

The rebel movement in Dagestan is smaller and probably weaker than the movement that produced virtual independence for Chechnya, where Russia waged a bloody and futile war from 1994 to '96.

Nevertheless, Russia's military leaders and its new prime minister, Vladimir Putin, will probably fail in their rash promise, made shortly after the Dagestan rebellion began, to put down the insurgency within a month. Thus far, the rebels have proved much more effective than Moscow gave them credit for being.

If Russia resorts to brutal force and massive human rights violations to put down the rebellion, the Dagestan

abrupt leadership, manifest in part by his frequent decisions to fire the prime ministers he appoints.

It's important to preserve Russia's political and economic stability. But achieving that goal will require more effective and more enlightened leadership than the country's leaders have thus far provided. Dagestan is only the latest test of that leadership.

The Chinese government has also succeeded in attracting the news headlines for a number of days for the wrong reason. China's decision to crack down on the leaders of a previously obscure spiritual movement, called Falun Gong, was an over-reaction born of fear. This sort of crackdown may accomplish a tactical objective for China, but over the long run, it could be self-defeating. Last April 25, a mass protest was organised in Beijing by leaders of the Falun Gong movement.

The movement mixes elements of Buddhism and Taoism and stresses traditional exercises as a way of acquiring spiritual strength. To the outside world, Falun Gong may seem a little goofy, but it doesn't appear to be very political, much less subversive.

So why did the government declare its intention last week to prosecute the top leaders of

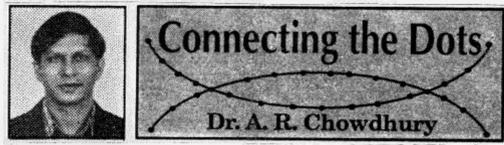
the group? It's expected that the government will sentence about 50 people to life in prison.

China's leaders aren't worried about Falun Gong's devotion to Buddhism, Taoism and the benefits of exercise; the government is worried because the group brought 10,000 people out on the streets on April 25, showing it can effectively mobilise large crowds. Seemingly harmless environmental organisations formed the nucleus of a political opposition group in East Germany before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and groups invoking mystical forces have helped to overthrow governments in China at transitional points in the history of that country.

China is at such a point now, trying to develop its economy while maintaining strict political control. Its current government, like any government, want to be firmly saddled. And it doesn't want it to be otherwise. Hence the crackdown.

The reprisal was thorough, but relatively mild. China often releases political prisoners before the end of their allotted jail terms, so it is very possible that the unlucky 50 Falun Gong leaders will be jailed relatively briefly.

Nevertheless, the reprisal was undemocratic. It also draws attention to (and thus may increase the standing of) what had been an obscure organisation. If the Beijing leadership is smart, it will ease up on this crackdown and promote stability and prosperity in other, more intelligent and rational ways. Reprisals of this sort create more problems than they solve.



Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

insurgents crossed the border from nearby Chechnya, a breakaway Russian republic, and proclaimed their intent to establish an independent Islamic republic in Dagestan, a region of 2 million people and more than 30 ethnic groups.

conflict may attract the kind of world attention that was directed to other conflicts in other previously obscure and unknown places, such as Bosnia and Kosovo.

China often releases political prisoners before the end of their allotted jail terms, so it is very possible that the unlucky 50 Falun Gong leaders will be jailed relatively briefly. Nevertheless, the reprisal was undemocratic. It also draws attention to (and thus may increase the standing of) what had been an obscure organisation.

## Dagestan: Is Oil at the Heart of the War?

by Harun ur Rashid

**Caspian Sea is a reservoir of oil. Each country skirting around it is scrambling to lay its hand on oil or build oil pipeline through its territory. There is a view that the militants had a hidden agenda. They were prompted to break away from Russia to cash in on the oil boom because Dagestan is to become a major transportation corridor for oil from the Caspian Sea.**

DAGESTAN, a northern Caucasus republic within Russian Federation, was rocked by a group of Islamic militants for more than two weeks. They declared independence of Dagestan on 7th August and proclaimed Jihad (holy war) to oust the Russians. They occupied a few strategic mountain peaks and received the support from a few war lords of Chechnya, neighbour of Dagestan. The veteran war lord Shamil Basayev joined the militants from Chechnya and fought against the Russian armed forces.

In the midst of the uprising, President Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin dismissed his fourth Prime Minister, Stepashin within a period of 18 months and installed Vladimir Putin. It signalled that the Kremlin was unstable and could face a political storm. Further the economic turmoil in Russia inevitably affected the efficiency of the internal administration in Russia and indecisiveness on the part of the authorities would follow. However, that was not to be the case. On the other hand, the uprising acted as an important irritant, provoking national elements in Russia to unite and support Mr. Putin. The State Duma (Lower House of Parliament) hastened to confirm the appointment of Mr. Putin without much debates.

It was a first test of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin who assured the Russians that the war would be over within two weeks. It is reported that about 2000 militants and 1500 Russian soldiers took part in the Dagestan battle. According to Russian sources, more than 1000 militants were killed

during the 18-day-old guerrilla war. But the rebels maintain they lost only 42 fighters. Russian soldiers were able to crush the rebellion on 24 August and it marked an important political victory for the two-week-old government of Prime Minister Putin.

To score a political victory, Prime Minister Putin undertook a surprise visit to Dagestan on 27 August. He needs to enhance his profile in the country as President Yeltsin wants Mr. Putin to contest the Presidential election in mid 2000.

The militants appeared to have misread the mood of the local people. Dagestan is a multi-ethnic republic which comprise of 35 distinct ethnic peoples and the militants were perceived as "trouble-makers" by the majority of local population and did not receive assistance and support from them. The locals fought with the Russians against the militants. In any guerrilla warfare, it is the attitude of the locals which determines the outcome. The militants knew that they would not be able to win this war when they realised that they had little support of the locals to oust the Russian rule.

For Russia, Dagestan is a territory of great strategic importance in terms of its location, regional political influence and its proximity to the Caspian Sea. The revolt in

Dagestan, if successful, could have a serious impact on the oil pipeline through Russia from the Caspian Sea. That was why the latest developments had posed such a threat to Moscow.

Taliban's brand of Islam in Afghanistan is a great worry for the Central Asian Republics and their neighbours Russia and China. It could spread to neighbouring Muslim regions in both Russia and China (16 million Muslims are concentrated among Wei Wuer and Hui peoples in China).

The revolt in Dagestan could have encouraged the Islamic militants festering in some of Central Asian Republics, Tajikistan, although now in peace, was shaken in the past by the Islamic militants. At the time of writing, radical Islamic groups from Uzbekistan took several Kirghiz soldiers and four Japanese geologists as hostages in the mountain-borders of Kirghizstan. Uzbekistan is also concerned with the rise of Islamic militants who threatened to kill the President last February and offered military support to Kirghizstan to wipe out the rebels. Kirghizstan leadership sought assistance from Russia to free the hostages.

It is no wonder that President Yeltsin met China's President Jiang Zemin at the two-day summit (24-25 August)

at the capital of Kirghizstan, Bishkek together with the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kirghizstan on the question of regional security and the threat from Islamic extremists in the region. In plain language, it means they had agreed to have common approach to crush the Islamic radical groups.

The uprising in Dagestan appears to manifest a trend discernible in the past when an empire became weak. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a period of instability and an window of opportunity presented itself to its constituents to break away from the Soviet Union. It worked for five Central Asian Republics, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in 1991. Chechnya attempted to follow the same path but could not become independent. Its political status is in a twilight zone. The militants in Dagestan, an Islamic conservative group, thought that it was their time to pursue their goal of independence.

Caucasus is physically joined to land at both ends, to Europe in the north and to Asia in the south. The mountain ranges which ring it on the landward side are so massive that activities in the region are difficult to control. The inhabitants of the Caucasus are Eurasians in more senses than one. Nowadays insularity

is shrinking fast in the area which is coming under increasing influence of the upsurge of Islamic militants in the Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan.

It takes no genius to forecast turbulence in the region. It is argued what have the militants got to lose by waging a war?

The Caucasus region is often called the backwater of Russia because of its impoverishment. The people in the region live in poverty and the free market economy has worsened their fortunes. The peasant societies in the region live under multiple burdens of fall in agricultural prices, high inflation and dwindling opportunities of migration to cities. Peasant community are being increasingly polarised by conflicts between the old order and the new.

The free-market economy in Russia appears to enrich the affluent section of Russia's population effects of which filled the cup of insecurity, already to the brim, for the poor people. Mass unemployment among the youth, economic distress and steep motherly attitude from Moscow continue to generate a sense of depression, despair, frustration and anger which can provide an easy outlet for revolt.

Caspian Sea is a reservoir of oil. Each country skirting around it is scrambling to lay its hand on oil or build oil

### To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### Less propaganda, please

Sir, It is a bit hypocritical to ceremoniously stage-manage routine activities like apprehending criminals or their voluntary surrender, (as hinted in the DS editorial of Aug 3).

Publicity is different from providing information, and it is also different from propaganda. The public need one of these three, two of which are gimmicks. One example is the surrenders of small gun-toting criminals at large commanded to appear 'hands up'. The Home Ministry does not enjoy the comforts of a home, but should act like a lean and mean office meant for netting and goading criminals, hard-core and inflated. Where the penalty kicks? (no sudden-deaths please)

Operating unlicensed vehicles by unlicensed or fake drivers are apparently not officially regarded as legal offences as they insolently command the major portions of the roads in the cities and highways. The milk of human kindness has turned sour in Bangladesh, and we do not produce enough milk to be able to set up economically a powder milk factory (the imported powder is only repackaged here).

Why the administration cannot get tough with all types of offenders and not simply with the political opposition, whose MPs have special citizen status? This open discrimination in crediting justice mars official credibility, and invites criticism. The government is simply not respectful of the press, judging from the insensitivity to public criticism. The freedom of the press is loud-mouthed, but official news on

actions is tight-lipped. Reduce the 'criminal' ceremonies. Are we going to have a Museum of Surrendered Arms — the regimes have to leave their mark on the times!

A Zabr Dhaka

### Where's our conscience?

Sir, These days whenever it rains, you can't help but get a feeling of sorrow with a twinge of guilt. That so many babies, little children, women and men — young and old, are out there in the rain with no shelter. Getting soaked to their skin and remaining so for days on end, is no less than a physical torture of any kind. Imagine yourself in their place and see how ghastly the feeling is, how immense their suffering is.

Their fault? Their crime? Is to be poor and helpless. Somebody whose pleas no one need pay heed to. Most of them are simple folks trying to survive against all odds by sheer perseverance and hard labour, including their little ones. They are not the criminals. Infact they are also victimized by the bad ones, who take advantage of their shanties, finding it a good place to hide their bad stuff. But they were helpless to prevent them for reasons too obvious.

But in the end these poor had to pay heavily for their helplessness. Their humble abodes were razed to the ground, their meager belongings lost. How could the gentry be so cruel to their own countrymen, treating them as a herd of animals and no better?

Where is our conscience?

Dr. Sabrina Dhaka

### Bangladesh drawn in

Sir, The air force activities on the Indo-Pakistan border near Karachi has heightened the tension between the two countries. This happened soon after India accused Pakistani intelligence and terrorist teams of trying to disrupt rail and road communication in Assam, NE India (a disturbed area, and more active prior to the Indian Independence Day). The bilateral escalation is acute now, and nerves are apt to be trigger-happy.

Just earlier, Bangladesh agreed in principle to examine the possibility of transshipment of Indian goods across Bangladesh; and now China has come up with a proposal to form an economic and trading bloc in South Asia comprising China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Western powers are interested in trading in South Asia, with Bangladesh as a key base.

Now Bangladesh is between two big super world powers, one Western, and the other Asian, as far as strategic location is concerned (inlet and outlet). Bangladesh is also sandwiched between two neighbours with subnormal trade activities (including one with great disparity). There is no reason why Myanmar and Bangladesh

should indulge in a mini cold-war, in spite of the past and receding Rohingya problem. Why are we so isolated?

There are other indicators of the shape of things to come. The bus services between India and Pakistan and Dhaka-Cuttack came at short interval in between. Big China cannot be oblivious to the huge market of South Asia with a population of a billion, and is not going to hand over the market to the Western business partners on a platter. Some diversion movement was tried in the Taiwan tension, but China's tough and clear stand has stalled the movement.

India has to deal with two fronts, the Eastern and the Western. It is not all quiet on the Eastern front, handled by an interim government in New Delhi.

Islamabad has many problems, internal and external. The do-and-die situation has not yet arrived, but other diversionary and belligerent movements might be tried in the near future to get out of the tight corner, politically and economically (both Afghanistan and India are not easy to handle).

In India, the ruling party is in limbo trying various overtures on the eve of the general elections round the corner; as the stakes are high. The opposition political parties in Dhaka suspects the sudden movement

### Wrong move may backfire

Sir, The report published in the Prothom Alo on August 8, 1999 on felling trees of Osman Udyan was outrageous. It was stated that after the construction of the International Conference Centre there in the remaining plot a police control room and city central station for Titas Gas will be constructed.

So all is set to annihilate 11,000 trees of Osman Udyan and thus tread upon the hopes of the people who were expecting that the government will not be insensitive and ruthless to take such a step which deprives people from all walks of life had been entreating and airing their protests against it different ways, forming human chains, arranging rallies, sit-in demonstrations and so on. But we are crestfallen by the government's attitude and total disrespect to people's feelings. The government is all the time referring to itself as 'people's government', is it the way a government who cares for its people acts?

Anvway, Osman Udyan issue jolted me but the Udyan mustn't be. Let senses prevail.

Nur Jahan Chittagong

to rename West Bengal as Bangla, and is trying to decode the signal. The opposition movement in Bangladesh cannot afford to fail, for self-survival; thereby raising political tension.

It is the time of heavenly eclipses. The one of the moon is due soon, after the solar eclipse (Nostradamus was speaking about this heavenly occurrence with his predictive warnings). Let us keep our fingers crossed.

A Husnain Dhaka

### How many wars to make peace?

Sir, Pakistan and India fought three major wars, a recent minor one and a host of undeclared battles, skirmishes etc. In 1948 after the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India, Pakistan sent thousands of tribal militia to Kashmir and they were on the verge of winning the game if they had not indulged in plunder before actually reaching Srinagar.

In 1971 they fought another decisive war which was not related to Kashmir. So far Pakistan has not tasted any victory.

Logically speaking there is no good reason as to why Pakistan should fight India. Since Pakistan always shot the first bullet, the onus lies with. How long Pakistan can keep on neglecting its duties towards its poor millions. Can they afford lighting wars only?

I worked with the Kashmiris, visited the land and did not find the Kashmiri middle class, upper middle class and even the working class people enthusiastic about integrating with Pakistan. They know which side of their bread is buttered.

Since India only reacts, it's Pakistan which should take the first move of disengagement and disarmament and should channelise the funds towards social sectors, improvement of infrastructure, human resource development etc.

Dr Syed Nasrullah Bara Magbaha, Dhaka

### Repair and recarpeting of roads

Sir, It is a routine affair for the DCC to spend crores of public money on repair and recarpeting of roads and streets every year. Whenever there are flood, heavy rain or water logging the amount of expenditure goes colossal. Moreover the DCC is always busy in demolishing and reconstructing road islands here and there repeatedly wasting more and more public money.

Our greatest surprise and complaint is where does all the public money go?

Whenever a road is repaired or recarpeted it gives away within 2-3 months. The road is neither strong nor durable. There are numerous cracks and pot holes here and there.

This way, year after year crores of Taka are being misappropriated and squandered from the public exchequer. It is alleged that a handsome amount of money of the tender is required to be distributed by the road contractors to some unscrupulous officers and staff of the DCC for payment of their bills and hence the poor and inferior quality of materials and repair works of various roads and streets.

We suggest that in addition to the DCC engineers, supervisors and inspectors a committee consisting of three respectable persons who have their residential houses, shops on the roads/streets wherein repair/recarpeting works are going on should check and examine the quality of materials and standard of works and certify the bills of contractors for payment in the greater interest of public service and transparency of road construction, and recarpeting works and proper use of public money.

O.H. Kabir 6 Hare Street Wari, Dhaka-1203