

Saboteurs at Work

THE tragic tale of death, blood and severed limbs enacted at the Ahmadiya Jamaat Khana (Kadiani mosque) in Khulna during Juma prayers generates disdain because of the pernicious perpetration, and fear because it augurs ill. The act of cowardice and brutality could be ascribed to a sectarian machination. Not quite unrelated perhaps is the recovery of powerful explosives with "suspected" timing or remote control devices from a mosque at the city's Mirpur area and also from the office premises of the Daily Janakantha.

The string of events, whether coincidental or part of a sinister machination, bears an ominous message: maybe, an ultra-religious or a terrorist group is out to upset the unique socio-cultural equanimity and communal harmony the country enjoys. Worse still, the nature of explosion in Khulna and recovered explosives and their accessories imply presence of influential individuals in the sinister machination.

The home ministry's instant reaction to the incident, tight-lipped as it is, reflects the gravity of the situation. Obviously, it is, as we all are, confounded by the incident and its implications on socio-political stability. However, it seems to have drawn a conclusion that explosion in Khulna and recovery of powerful explosives in the capital on the same day may have been coincidental. At least, that is what the announcement of separate bodies to investigate the incidents leads one to believe. We hope, too, that there isn't any link between the two; but what if there is? Would it not be wiser to eliminate the possibility of a linkage upon finding supportive evidence rather than discarding the idea outright?

Early this year, a powerful explosion at the Udichi Sanskritik Goshthi function in Jessore had left eight people killed. Many believe the explosives were planted at the spot beforehand and detonated with a remote control. In this case, too, there appears to have been the use of either remote control or timing device. Also, there are speculations that the explosive recovered from the Janakantha office is an anti-tank mine. The terrorists, if we call them terrorists without politically branding them, were equipped with sophisticated gadgets, so it seems. How did the criminals get hold of them? Were these not smuggled into the country? There are certainly questions to ask and find out answers to. To that end, first and foremost, the home ministry must go beyond treating the incidents as mere breach of law and order.

While condoling the deaths and empathising with the bereaved families, we urge the government to ferret out the fanatical brutes without malice and pay them their dues. Exemplary punishment for the criminals should be a deterrent to recurrence of such heinous acts.

Why Shut All Doors?

IT seems the ruling party and the opposition are in a contest to surpass each other in political toughness. Never mind the people's sufferance and the economy's nose-dive! Apparently it was regarded as 'provocative' by opposition leader Begum Zia when prime minister Sheikh Hasina had made a fresh offer for talks to the former with the caveat that this time she ought to 'specify her demands' and not be mercurial with them. Khaleda Zia in a sharp reaction to the offer not merely rejected it out of hand but caustically suggested that if an official overture is made for a dialogue she would be only prepared to discuss the modality for the government's abdication of power.

Thereafter, two unsettling developments took place on Friday last. BNP chief Begum Zia chaired a meeting of the secretaries general of her party, Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islamic Oikya Jote to mark a departure from 'issue-based agitation to one-point movement aimed at AL government's downfall at the shortest possible time to facilitate holding of national elections ahead of schedule.' At the next stage the chiefs of alliance partners are likely to meet in a bid to precipitate the government's exit.

At the other pole, the 67-member Awami League Central Working Committee (ALWC) in a meeting at Gonobhaban chaired by the Prime Minister decided that no more offer for dialogue will be made to the opposition unless they have withdrawn their one-point demand.

Obviously, the government cannot discuss its own ouster so that its reaction is understandable. Even so we would implore it to create an atmosphere for talks by means of suitable confidence-building overtures to the opposition. The memories of double standards practised in term of allowing anti-hartal processions while forbidding pro-hartal processions during a general strike call and arrests made of opposition activists and cases allegedly started against many of them need to be erased by a transformed behaviour pattern from the ruling party. And during the secretariat siege programme of the opposition, newspapers reported about obstructionism engineered by ruling party supporters at all highway entry points to Dhaka city. Let there be no repetition of this.

That said, we turn to the opposition to say, "Please pay heed to our one-point advice: elected government cannot be made to fall except through elections." This was proved in 1996 and this will be proved again, despite AL's one point demand then and the BNP-led opposition's one-point demand now. Democracy is all about the sovereignty of the ballot and no political party can ever arrogate that supremacy of popular will to itself.

We fervently appeal to the ruling party and the opposition to pull back from this extreme political posturings so that there can be some kind of an opening for the talks to take place. The price of their failure to do so is bound to be unpayably high in terms of economic peril and political destabilisation. They must act before it is too late.

Voters Want Combination of Parties to Rule at Centre

Politicians are politicians. Their interests get mired in demands which no Prime Minister can accommodate. After some time the NDA partners are bound to be restive. One or two-member parties may not matter. But the bigger ones, if they revolt, can shake the government. I do see such an eventuality in two years' time.

INDIAN voters are wary about national political parties. They have shown their preference for regional organisations. And the combination, the National Democratic Front, they have turned with a clear majority is because they want the Centre to reflect the local aspirations.

There is a lesson for the BJP, which has added only one seat to its previous tally of 181. The allies have swelled its numbers to around 296. Whatever else it means, it shows that though the body is that of the BJP, the regional parties are the tail wagging. Let not the body ignore the tail.

In fact, in the last three elections the regional parties, which may well be described as the third force, not the front are emerging poll by poll. Together, they had 55 seats in 1991. But the number more than doubled in 1996 and went up to 131. In 1998, it rose to 150. They are about 200 this time. The percentage of votes has also risen, from 15 in 1991 to 24.63 in 1996 and to 29.66 in 1998. This time it is around 35.

The people have not given a fractured verdict, as by now Prannod Mahajan complained in one of his programmes on TV. What they conveyed is that they did not have faith in one-party government. They do not want to put all their eggs in one basket. They want the role of more than one party at the Centre, expecting them to give their best and at the same time keeping an eye on each other.

If in the urban polling areas the turnout was low, less than the country's average of 52.3 per

cent, it was not because of poll fatigue but because of disillusionment. There were no ideological issues, nor issues which transcended the states. The parliamentary election was reduced to local needs of water, power, shelter or job. Yet the clear message the voters gave was that the Centre and the state governments have failed to sort out the basic problems of the people.

Elections became regional and even local. Pakistan's intrusion into Kargil touched them because they had seen dead bodies on the TV, a medium which played an important role. Their mind, primarily in urban areas, was somewhat influenced by Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin and the fact that she had not become an Indian national for 15 years.

The Shreya Desam in Andhra Pradesh swept the polls because it was able to convey to the people that the policies the party was pursuing will carry them to the tomorrow of plenty. People in India are patient. All they want to see is whether that path their government pursues would help them get roti, kapda and makan. The Shromani Akali Dal in Punjab has been routed although water and power to farmers were made

available free. The Badal government had no dream to sell. Bihar is another example where Laloo Prasad Yadav betrayed the people's confidence and appropriated funds meant for the state's development.

The voters realised that their problems cannot be solved by state governments alone. They want the Centre to be a participant. The BJP has appreciated

base.

The Congress is beginning to comprehend the point. Party president Sonia Gandhi has said that she is not averse to a coalition. Had she accepted the concept of coalition, she would have been the Prime Minister last year. Mulayam Singh refused to support her when she said that the Congress would go it alone in forming the govern-

198, though its own strength has increased from its previous tally of 181 by only one seat.

However, surprising is that the Congress, despite its penances and promises, has not been able to get back the Muslims and Dalits, once its vote bank. They have stayed with Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party and Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party. The BJP should ponder over its loss of 27 seats in UP because in the last three elections it has never secured less than 50 seats. The sabotage by chief minister Kalyan Singh, a BJP top leader, does not explain the defeat fully. Perhaps the Hindu vote, which had consolidated under the BJP after the Babri masjid demolition, does not find the party Hindu enough.

There is, however, no doubt that a coalition demands compromise. The BJP had to concede AIADMK chief Jayalalitha's demands to survive. This time it may have to bend further if there is more than one Jayalalitha. Already two of its allies, Om Prakash Chautala's Indian National Lok Dal of Haryana and Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress have attacked the hike in diesel prices. The INLD got five and the TC eight seats.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the voters' wishes. It saw the point two years ago and constituted the NDA to join hands with some other parties. It even suspended part of its own agenda to accommodate them. It was a post-election alliance. This time the party entered into an alliance before the polls and prepared a common agenda. Not only that, the BJP assured its allies that it would form a coalition government, even if it had a majority on its own, understanding the people's mood and the necessity of a wider

ment, although its own strength was only 141 in the 545-member Lok Sabha.

This approach is as much wrong today as it was yesterday. How can the Congress, which has 30 seats less than its earlier tally of 141, expect the other parties to build its majority and then stay away, leaving the Congress to enjoy the fruits of government? The BJ, which has understood the mathematics of numbers, has rallied around it nearly 115 members from other parties to reach the figure of

How Stable will the Indian Government be, this Time?

How could they clinch such a resounding victory? What are the reasons that the Congress fared so badly? And, where does the secular and progressive third force stand now?

FOR the first time since 1984, the Indian electorate has given the verdict in favour of a party or an alliance in a general election. The development is particularly significant, as a spectre of instability has been haunting India for several years, since no party or combine could win a resounding victory in the polls. This situation caused short-lived governments. In the absence of an absolute majority, parties or groups cobbled together in the wake of the "hung parliament" after the votes and somehow succeed to form a government, which in most cases proved disastrous.

Political expediencies of the divergent forces seldom last long and the logical corollary to this undesirable condition is the collapse of the government, leading to midterm elections. At times, the tenure of the governments is ridiculously short as Atal Bihari Vajpayee led BJP government was in office for 13 days following the 1996 polls. The government that had succeeded was that of a "third force" led by the Janata Dal but it also had to rely on the outside support of Congress which twice pulled the rug from below the H. D. Deve Gowda and I. K. Gujral governments triggering their fall.

After 1998 elections, the BJP again came to power, but Prime Minister Vajpayee had a real tough time in maintaining the cohesion of the coalition and finally had to bow to an unpredictable ally from the south Ms. Jayaram Jayalalitha who called off her cricket support. Obviously, new elections were announced, as the opposition also failed to come forward with an alternative govern-

ment. But the million-dollar question was then whether the voters will this time give a decisive mandate so that a party or coalition could rule with comfort and complete its five-year term, or again instability? How long can India afford such fluid political situation? The electorate must swing either way in the broadly bipolar system that has of late emerged as a pattern in the Indian politics as the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) or the Congress-led opposition.

The third force of centrist and leftists would never ally with the NDA. They may do the same with the Congress, if necessary, but would prefer to remain aloof from both. Its preference for the Congress is for the reason that it is a secular political organisation.

The NDA victory was anticipated but uncertainty existed whether it could come out with a comfortable majority. The latest assessments by most analysts also in this column as just before vote-counting began was that it would scrape through with a bare majority in the 543-member house in gaining the right to form a new government. The magic number is 273 which is the minimum for an absolute majority and the NDA was projected to have something between 280 and 285. Earlier it was thought that the downward assessment was attributed to late swing by main opposition, Congress, in the largest state of Uttar Pradesh where it has finally done well.

But the NDA has won 296 of the 537 seats. Voting did not take place in some areas due to severe flooding. As such, the BJP-led NDA has lived up to the best prediction. This has even a pleasant surprise for its leaders whose gleeful mood was so apparent that they shared sweets among themselves.

How could they extract such a resounding victory? What are the reasons that the Congress fared so badly? And, where does the secular and progressive third force stand now?

NDA and its main constituent BJP rode a crest of popularity for several factors.

situation well by avoiding a direct war with Pakistan which would have increased the chances of nuclear conflict, by driving out the Pakistan-backed insurgents from Indian side of line of control.

The hard-liners within BJP were favouring a tougher line on the crisis and also on certain matters relating to sensitive religious issues. Mr. Vajpayee and other liberals maintained their dominance and some other partner organisations of the coalition, which believe in secularism also kept up the pressure so that the NDA sticks to their "national agenda" and not

bid to become Prime Minister was scuttled by some opposition groups like, Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi party. Mrs. Gandhi who was earlier seen as reclusive and least bothered about power, showed unusual interest to become prime minister after formally joining politics. But she did not succeed. The question that struck the mind of most Indians was: why was the opposition so desperate to bring down the government, and then, it failed to form own government and thus throwing the country into political uncertainty? After all, snap polls cause tremendous strains on the politico-economic systems.

The "Kargil" issue came as a boon for the NDA and the opposition found itself in dire straits to totally ignore the government's success in dealing with the conflict. Congress also chose wrong electoral allies like populists Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar and Ms. Jayaram Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, both of whom are mired in corruption charges. Both their parties fared badly in the polls compared to their performances last time. On the other hand, the secret of success of the NDA is the ability to jettison the trouble-making allies from the wobbly coalition. Earlier, Jayalalitha was an ally but she adopted a volte-face and was largely responsible for the fall of Vajpayee government. The split in the opposition like in the Janata Dal, the dominant faction leaning to the NDA and weakening of the Congress by parties of ways by Maharashtra heavyweight Sharad Pawar,

contributed considerably to the opposition debacle. Last but not the least, most Indians certainly liked to see Mr. Vajpayee as the Prime Minister instead of Mrs. Gandhi, who has not only been accused of having "foreign background", but also a novice in politics. The "third force" more or less retained its influences in certain pockets but also received jolts as the BJP-Trinamool Congress alliance in its leftist citadel West Bengal. The Left Front lost some seats. However, the leftists could maintain its ascendancy in areas where they were known to be a force to reckon with.

While the story is happy for the Congress, there is some silver lining for it. Mrs. Gandhi's own success from two constituencies spoke of her being accepted by people in politics despite orchestrated NDA onslaught on her foreign origin. She has got a berth in parliament in her maiden electoral bout and is certain to be the leader of the opposition. The emergence of the Congress as the single largest party in Maharashtra assembly gladdened it. The NDA despite its landslide victory may still feel the pressures from its allies for ministerial berths in the new cabinet. But it is in a position to ward off such pressures, as it is no longer with a wafer-thin majority in the house.

The Indians seemed tired of polls and looked for a stable government. The NDA is set for a long innings and expectedly full term unless unforeseen developments like major splits in the coalition make the scenario otherwise. But again, it's too early to comment on such a possibility.



Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

First, its 13-month performance might not have been a success story, but it was not lacklustre either. Short after coming to power in March 1998, it went exploding several nuclear devices. This move was looked at as a national achievement by most Indians. But Prime Minister Vajpayee also, moderately, made peace overtures with arch-rival Pakistan by historic bus trip to Lahore that projected him as someone earning for peace in tension-ridden South Asia.

Then again, when the "Kargil" issue cropped up, his interim government tackled the

its own party line. All these, coupled with Mr. Vajpayee's own image and the concern to rid the country of another "hung parliament" resulted in the decisive victory. Congress failures were due to several reasons. Foremost among them was its failure to form an alternative government after it triggered the collapse of the NDA government in April last. Contrarily, those pulled down the administration only squabbled among themselves rather than succeeding to give a new one.

Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, the Congress president, suddenly appeared keen for power but her

The Conflict in Dagestan: Kremlin Faces Dilemma

by ASM Nurunnabi

THERE have been some disquieting reports lately that fundamentalist extremism has taken root in the northeast Caucasus. Middle East extremists have reportedly moved into the region. Some quarters in the Russian government suggested that Osama bin Laden himself might be funding the region's fundamentalist surge. The main beneficiaries are reportedly the Wahibis — a term for a collection of Arab-backed fundamentalists in the region. Before the Chechen war, as reported by observers, there were very few of them; now Wahibis are said to take up a key part of the anti-Russian forces fighting in Dagestan.

By all accounts, the rebellion in Dagestan, a multiethnic region in the Caspian Sea, is led by two key figures. Both are fervent Islamic fundamentalists and were key commanders in the Chechen uprising that started in 1994. One is Shamil Basayev, a daring commander who fought with the current elected leader of Chechnya. The other key figure is Khattab, an ethnic Chechen whose family immigrated to Turkey in the 1920s and then to Jordan. He reportedly fought the Russians in Afghanistan, and in February 1995, he joined Basayev's separatists in Chechnya, setting up a camp to train young Muslims for guerilla war. By 1996, his exploits had made him famous. Khattab directs a

force that reportedly includes a significant number of mujaheddin from Afghanistan. In fact, Chechnya is reportedly becoming very much like Afghanistan: a base for Islamic radicalism and terrorism — and for drug smuggling and other criminal activities.

During the Chechen war, Basayev was admired both as a man and as a great commander and defender of his people, who suffered terribly in the Russian invasion of Chechnya. The brutalizing effects of the Chechen war, and the destruction of the economy, have contributed, as stated by observers, to the breakdown of Chechen society, as thousands of heavily armed unemployed young men seek revenge against Russia.

However, in their attack on Dagestan and the actions linked to them, Basayev and his comrades are said to be no longer acting as freedom fighters in defence of Chechnya. Their aim is reportedly to establish an Islamic state that incorporates Chechnya and Dagestan. As such, they are in direct opposition not only to Russia but also to the Chechen President, Gen. Aslan Maskhadov. After leading the Chechen forces to victory against Russia, Maskhadov was elected President in January, 1997 but he has been following a policy of moderation.

The most ominous thing is that the great majority of Dagestan's 34 nationalities op-

pose the Chechens and Wahabis. The animosity is not solely ethnic. Most Dagestanis follow local Sufi Islamic traditions and regard the fundamentalism as alien and frightening. The Dagestani government of Mahomedal Mahomedov is strongly committed to keeping Dagestan in the Russian Federation. This is a completely different situation from that of Chechnya in December, 1994, when the great majority of the population rose up to resist the Russian invasion.

The real danger in Dagestan, according to analysts, is that Chechen and Islamic pressure may overturn the republic's extremely delicate and fragile ethnic balance. As anxiety grows over the rebel attacks, the Dagestan government is arming its own ethnic supporters. These groups, however, are hostile to each other often and also have close links to organized crime.

The conflict in Chechnya was thought to be over three years ago with a truce in that breakaway Republic. But the conflict revived last month, when Chechen-led rebels invaded neighbouring Dagestan. They quickly withdrew after being pounded by Russian warplanes and artillery, only to invade again early this month. On Sept 4, a bomb ripped through a Russian apartment building in

Dagestan. The explosion appeared to be the start of a sophisticated and ruthlessly executed terrorist campaign. Three deadly bombings followed — two in Moscow, and one in the southern city of Volgograd. In all, nearly 300 people were killed in 16 days of terror. And the Russian security services braced for more.

The authorities blamed Islamic extremists from the Caucasus region for the blasts and rounded up thousands of Chechens, ordering them to go back to Chechnya. So far, no one had claimed responsibility for most of the bombings, though a previously unknown group calling itself the Dagestan Liberation Army said it had directed one of the Moscow attacks. Chechen leaders insisted they had no connection to any bombings.

The ailing Russian President Boris Yeltsin is so weak — and the political environment so vicious — that the bombings triggered wild speculation. Some rumours said the bombs were set on behalf of politicians who wanted to succeed Yeltsin. Others said the attacks were designed to provoke a state of emergency that would allow Yeltsin to step down in favour of Vladimir Putin, his Prime Minister — and designated successor — at the moment. Still other rumours said Yeltsin would fire Putin, replace him

with Aleksandr Lebed, the former general who negotiated the Chechen truce, and then cancel scheduled parliamentary and presidential elections.

There was not a shred of evidence for any of the conspiracy theories. That left Moscow confronting a bleak, and equally bleak, reality: conflict with Islamic rebels has now spawned a terror campaign that has no precedent in modern Russia.

Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov has now split with the other key figure, fomenting trouble in Dagestan, Khattab, because of Maskhadov's relative moderation in imposing Islamic law. Maskhadov has disavowed any role in Dagestan, but he is plainly incapable of stopping Basayev's and Khattab's hit-and-run attacks across the Chechen border into Dagestan.

Washington is trying to supply Moscow with useful intelligence on the terror campaign which has made Muscovites angry and fearful. Already, thousands of Muscovites have moved out of their city apartments and are staying in country dachas. Millions more direct their rage against the large Chechen diaspora in Moscow.

In this context, Russian government prepared for new military operations against Chechnya, which is believed to be harbouring Islamic militants. Russia had bombed the Chechen

capital, Grozny, several times. But it has ruled out a return to all-out war against Chechnya, saying it would only backfire if it believed would be of help to Muslim guerrillas who have twice attacked the neighbouring province of Dagestan to try to set an Islamic state there. Russian officials have said air raids would continue as at present until they have destroyed the fighters, their bases and sites in Chechnya. They have already set up a "security zone" manned by three tiers of Russian troops inside Chechenian territory.

There is, however, serious concern in many quarters that the guerilla war in the Caucasus and terrorism in Moscow could spiral into disaster, both for Russia and for the West. The bombing campaign that has all of Russia on edge could not be more serious. It highlights the insoluble dilemma the Kremlin faces in the Caucasus and risks destabilizing the entire Russian state. The apalling high body count could spark a Russian backlash against Caucasian people in general, increasing ethnic hatred to Russia, and above all in the ethnically mixed North Caucasus itself. The terror could also lead Russia into another bloody and disastrous intervention in Chechnya, whose indications have already emerged, a misguided attempt to stop the guerilla attacks at their source.

To the Editor...

Bomb blast in mosque

Sir, Yesterday morning when I saw the headline in your paper I thought the DS made a mistake by putting Khulna instead of Kanchi. But then after checking the other dates my worst thought came to disgust me. What are we heading to? This is the worst scenario one could expect in Bangladesh.

For some time now a small group of extremists have been actively fanning anti Khadiani propaganda along with other fundamentalist viewpoints.

This definitely is a part of their bigger programme of ethnic cleansing we saw attempted and failed in 1971. This is not democracy and goes against the grain of secular belief and heritage that the people of Bangladesh have followed for centuries.

Let us not allow these sort of antisocial elements to destroy our society and the nation with the perverted and narrow-minded viewpoints which is retarding the process of progress and development.

Akku Chowdhury Banani, Dhaka

Felling of trees after 10 pm

Sir, The news 'Felling of trees any day after 10 pm' published in the DS on 5.10.99 is a heart-rending one.

Now there is no time to discuss the usefulness of trees and defend their existence in the urban by holding speeches and rallies. This is now a social, political and moral issue. The Dhakaites (who are the real proprietors of the urban) including our essayist of the first rank, Prof Sirajul Islam Choudhury and our famous poet, Shamsur Rahman (now

ailing and in Singapore) have been engaged in the movement against the felling of trees for quite some time now.

If their demand is dishonoured then it would appear that the nation as a whole is dishonoured by the government.

Therefore any step of felling the trees and establishment of unnecessary NAM Summit Centre will have far-reaching political consequences. Doesn't the government realise this simple fact?

M A S Molla member, BAAS Dhaka

Time to win

Sir, Many things have been said and heard about the politics of Bangladesh. Hartal, demonstration, miseries, and flood are the sorrowful tales of our country. Most astonishing thing about this country is that the people always come out smiling the next day.

We have had not many days to cheer and celebrate the occasions. But our cricketers are giving us something to cheer about. Not many months ago we experienced one of the best time of our life by celebrating the win against the mighty Pakistani cricket team in the World

Cup.

Again to our delight recently, we played a very good rain-shortened game against a strong West Indian side. My heart to the boys of Bangladesh cricket team. It is just the beginning of Bangladesh cricket era. There will be lot more happy moments. But we have to take every game as it comes. Building a strong foundation is very important for us.

I wish and hope to see our cricketers play far better game in the years to come. Heads up and now it is time to play to win against any cricket team. Belal Dhaka