

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. Ali

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Predatory Student Politics

THE politics of retaliation took its toll on Wednesday at Chittagong as five Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activists and a couple of others were gunned down in broad daylight near Bahaddar Hat. Unconfirmed reports have put the death toll to eight and all fingers are pointed at the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) for this gruesome act of killing fellow human beings. Chittagong has a long history of bloody clashes among the student fronts of all the three major political parties of the country — AL, BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami — and Shibir, the student wing of Jamaat, has always been considered to be the strongest and the meanest.

The present crisis erupted when the Chittagong Commercial Institute was shifted to its new premises at Bakulia from Nasirabad where it had been functioning since 1964. Nasirabad is known to be a stronghold of the BCL while Bakulia is a traditional bastion of the ICS. The BCL activists were worried and thought that their influence on the Institute would recede as it had been shifted to Bakulia. On last Saturday they had a preliminary round of conflict with the activists of ICS at the Institute in which a number of people sustained bullet injury. It is alleged the Shibirites, keen to take control of the Institute, indulged in the pre-planned massacre on Wednesday.

The politics of acrimony, retaliation and murder has taken a deep root in the students' organisations owned, backed and financed by the mainstream political parties of the country. The glorious tradition of student politics right from the Language Movement of 1952 to the Liberation War of 1971 is being tarnished by wanton spilling of blood and loss of precious lives. A nation which has seen so much sacrifice cannot afford to spend its energy on such fringe matters as establishing influence on a small educational institution. We have so much to do and achieve in so many spheres of our national life towards improving the living standards of millions of citizens, finding employment for hundreds of thousands of educated unemployed, increasing literacy and ensuring minimum health care for all. Instead the students are being used to achieve the political objectives of the parties as cannon fodder.

Who will take responsibility for the lives lost in Chittagong? Can these shattered families be compensated by any means? The leaders don't care when it comes to someone else's child. That is the tragedy. It is not enough to rush to the spot of occurrence; perhaps, it will not be enough to hang the murderers either. But the culprits must be brought to book forthwith and the organisation they belong to should be banned. The nation will brook no nonsense from any quarters in this matter.

Friday Mailbox

Shifting of the capital

Sir, Recently while talking to BBC Radio regarding the shifting of the capital, the Chief of Army Staff has stated that the Cantonment cannot be shifted as it has grown in last 50 years and therefore, it is more justifiable to shift the capital rather than the Cantonment (DS 10 July).

Since the Chief of Army Staff has referred history, I would like to request him to delve more deeply into the history of Dhaka and then to decide which one to be shifted first—the capital or the Cantonment.

Nurul Basher
Dhaka

Code of conduct

Sir, I strongly support the observation of the President that some sections of the leaders of our society are not setting the proper code of conduct for the younger generation to follow. The President has specially pointed his finger at the educationists and political leaders ("President blasts political leaders and teachers", DS 11 July).

The younger generation tend to follow these bad examples and grow up in an environment of unethical dealings, violence and corrupt practices. The practice of the philosophy of something—for nothing is being encouraged, without realising that the eternal law of compensation will take its toll in the long run, as is happening in many other countries whose rise and fall have been analysed and documented. This is eroding the moral foundation of good life and the long-term effects will last for a long time. How to get out of this vicious circle?

The philosophy of life is being debased and redefined by opportunists, self-seekers, sycophants; led by the politicians, who are power hungry and misuse it on the slightest pretext; and then retaliate with puerile sermons. What is amazing is that they care a hoot for public feedback and do not treat the voters at peer level. Are they unknowingly inviting another cooling-off period, when the present strain exceeds the limit? Reactions are equal and opposite to the adverse actions, awaiting proper retribution.

Like the high-flood level marks, gross materialism spills into degeneration, as such cycles are necessary for purgation. The political leaders are eroding their market value; and it is not an encouraging sign before the next elections, just round the corner. This is not the first time the President has spoken on the deplorable state of the society. Why is he different from our political mindset? Political leadership is becoming more and more irresponsible; and it is a pity that this needs to be pointed out. Polarised leadership cannot save Bangladesh.

A Frustrated Taxpayer
Dhaka

Bhola island-potential 'Singapore' of Bangladesh

Sir, The reports in the media about the potential prosperity and development of Bhola island in the next ten years is not all akash

kushum (colourful imagination); considering its natural gas production (offshore), and future site for the setting up of power plants; followed by a base for medium industries, along with small port facilities.

However, there is one big BUT — provided the fishy greenhouse effect does not sink the island in the next 50-100 years due to rise in the sea level (warming of the ocean waters). This area of the Bay of Bengal is also the birth place of emerging new islands (chars), due to the huge deposit of deltaic silt (two billion tons per annum by the 500 or so rivers flowing into the Bay).

A practical feasibility survey is called for, to enable drafting of the outline of a master plan for the rapid development of this rich southern area of Bangladesh. There are a number of choices for development: fish and canning factories, marine industry, dockyard or mini shipyard, mini port, fertiliser factory, marine training complex etc.

Let's wait and see how the matter is handled by the government.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Inactive OIC

Sir, The OIC (lacerated organ of the Islamic countries) is as passive as ever. The recent OIC meet in Kuala Lumpur, clearly revealed that the Muslim nations are not willing to present a united front on many international issues; and are allowing the Western industrial powers to dictate the scenario.

The limbo is similar to the dormant state of SAARC.

Familiarity breeds contempt; and love thy neighbour is only to be cultivated in the books and in documents. While Mahathir in Kuala Lumpur is bemoaning the absence of an Islamic international media service, the Pakistan chief is berating India for India's big brother image, surrounded by smaller SAARC members.

In the Islamic block, Iraq, Iran and the Arab nations must come to an understanding to project Islamic solidarity to the outside world. The global scene is changing fast and all must take advantage of the changing scenario to create a niche on the global chessboard. The continued imperial isolation of the Arab world is disconcerting.

Iraq and Iran are the victims of Western propaganda, schemes and machinations (remember, both are oil countries; and where there is energy, the North is interested). The Western standard of living is on the decline and the prosperity curve is shifting to Asia in the current century. There is a scramble for market, and South Asia is seemingly to play a dynamic role in feeding EU and USA for the decades to come.

The populous Islamic nations are down (Afghanistan, CIS states, Indonesia, Pakistan; and Bangladesh yet to take off); while the Arabs cling to themselves and see only Palestine in their vision; ignoring Turkey which is trying to have a new look at return to the Islamic fold. Whither Islamic unity?

AMA
Dhaka

UN Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons

Determining the Strategies for Bangladesh

by Brig (Retd) Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc

Bangladesh needs to devise her strategies keeping the ground reality in focus as well as the likely scope and the aims and objectives of UN 2001 Conference in mind. The government ought to involve its various agencies and institutions, NGOs, and civil society in formulating Bangladesh's own plan of action in this regard.

to make recommendations to the Conference on all relevant matters, including the objective, a draft agenda, draft rules of procedure and draft final documents. The committee held its first session from 28 Feb to 3 Mar 2000 in New York. It also decided to hold its second session from 8 to 19 January 2001 at New York Headquarters, and the third from 19 to 30 March 2001.

Although the detail agenda is yet to be finalised, it could be presumed that the major recommendations contained in the two reports of the UN Panel of Experts (1997 and 1999) would fall within the scope of the UN Conference since the element of consensus regarding the scope of the 2001 Conference has already been provided in the 1999 report of the 'UN Group on Small Arms'. The ultimate aim of the conference would be to formulate an International Action Programme that would "establish and develop a set of international norms and standards in the areas covered by the 2001 Conference and to establish a framework work within which international efforts can be subsequently developed in a sustained and coordinated way."

Preparatory Committee Meetings

It would be appropriate at this point to briefly look at the tone and tenor of the first 'Preparatory Committee' meeting. On the scope of the Conference, a strong case for a comprehensive approach in tackling this issue was made.

Since the causal links of the problem was multifarious it was argued that the 'mandate of the Conference should cover a wide range of issues such as the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons; the legal trade in those weapons; the negative effects of widespread access to small arms on socio-economic development and human security; increased transparency in arms transfers; and the interrelationship between illicit trafficking, smuggling and the legal trade in small arms."

By the same token, a number of delegates felt that, given the diversity of situations, such elements as economic and social development, and human rights standards of governments should not be discussed, as that could lead to an over-politicised debate and could put at risk any success in combating the illicit trade in small arms.

While some made a case for bringing in the issue of legal transfer under the ambit of the 2001 Conference there were arguments against enlarging the footprint of the UNGA mandate and instead to keep the focus exclusively on the illicit trade in small arms in all its aspects. Otherwise, it was felt, the whole range of issues of state sovereignty, particularly the right of a State to develop its own defence system for its legitimate national security needs as also the legitimate rights of States to own, produce and transfer small arms, as they represented an indispensable means to safeguard national defence and domestic law and order would drop up.

Some delegates felt that a successful outcome of the Conference would be acceptance of a plan of action with a timetable for implementation. Some of the elements highlighted in such a plan might include supply and demand; State responsibility; and developing agreed norms for the security and safe management of arms stockpiles being held by State authorities or State authorised entities.

Several delegates expressed the view that the final document of the Conference should include a political declaration setting out a framework for future cooperation and action. It should identify elements that would encourage future cooperation and facilitate regional action, such as information exchange, strengthening national laws and regulations, management of stockpiles and improvement in the system of tracing illicit arms flows.

Bangladesh's Approach

Recognising this phenomenon as being not only national but a regional and global issue also, Bangladesh needs to formulate her strategies in order to make her participation in the said UN Conference worthwhile and fruitful and future plan of action relevant and workable.

Internal, regional as well as global dynamics have their respective inputs in the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Isolated actions will not only be futile, it may prove counterproductive. As such we need to take our regional part-

ners on board, since regional initiative will form a very important adjunct of whatever global plan of action is devised.

This problem cannot be tackled from only one perspective. There are at least three different but overlapping perspectives. There are those who view the issue through an arms control and disarmament lens, and those who view it through a crime control and criminal justice lens. There are also those who view the issue through a peace-building and human security lens, seeing the proliferation — as symptomatic of conflict, poverty, under-development and despair — that a coherent approach is needed. Without such an approach any piece-meal effort — will only inevitably meet with limited success.

Two important aspects of the issue emerge from the foregoing comments. One is the universality of the problem i.e. that it cannot be combated in isolation or single handedly by individual states. The solutions will have to be conceived and implemented in consonance and cooperation with the international community at large, particularly with our neighbours. The other equally important aspect is that it must be tackled in a comprehensive manner, where security should be synonymous to development and where the objectives of the efforts of both must be coterminous.

Our emphasis must therefore be on comprehensive approach in addressing this issue because, "the problems of proliferation and excessive accumu-

lation of small arms is complex and multidimensional one, and there is no simple solution. It highlights domestic and regional security concerns and exhibits humanitarian and development related components."

Both the demand and supply side of illicit trade, as well as measures restraining illicit transit flows would have to be addressed. On the demand side we must go into the reasons that cause a thriving market to exist. The tension areas, the country specific problems, and the socio-economic conditions need to be addressed. On the supply side the grey and black market operation must be looked into.

While there will be difference of opinion on bringing in the issue of legal transfer under the ambit of the Conference 2001, arguments to strengthen controls on legal transfer of such weapons to prevent them from being diverted into illicit markets, stand on very strong grounds. However, control on legal transfer must not stand in the way of serving a nation's national security interests.

Bangladesh needs to devise her strategies keeping the ground reality in focus as well as the likely scope and the aims and objectives of UN 2001 Conference in mind. The government ought to involve its various agencies and institutions, NGOs, and civil society in formulating Bangladesh's own plan of action in this regard, so that our input could be posted to the two Preparatory Committee Meetings that are to be held in January and March 2001.

Also, the nature of the problem holds strong rationale for evolving a common SAARC position for UN 2001 Conference.

The author is former Director General of Bangladesh Institute of International Strategic Studies.

Our Faces have Gone to the Walls

When Pompey the Great organised a particularly revolting slaughter of elephants, the populace rose up and cursed him for his ruthlessness. What is our reaction to the ruthlessness writ on the walls? We stop in front of them and read the posters with the careful aloofness of museum-goers. And then saunter, perhaps with a sense of ersatz security that it did not happen to us.

Crosstalk

Mohammad Badrul Hossain



"piecemeal social engineering" was put forward by Karl Popper who argued that ideology rests on a logical mistake, because it tries to transform history into science. Popper saw in the enterprise of ideology an attempt to find certainty in history and produce predictions.

The question is whether all those faces on the walls are the measures of anything except the certainty that those lives have been lost? Is there an ideology behind their deaths, any sublime cause for which their existence must have been laminated in the gloom on those posters? The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre stated in some of his writings that "dirty hands" are necessary in politics and that a man with so-called bourgeois inhibitions about bloodshed cannot usefully serve a revolutionary cause. Marat was a French revolutionary who exclaimed how one could not see that he wanted to cut off a few heads to save many. Killing was necessary in order to create, he concluded.

But what does sporadic

killing create when parochial intentions dominate political will? And that is where cruelty undermines conviction. Saint-Just reasoned that even virtue "unites with crime in times of anarchy." Then he despaired. "The exercise of terror has blunted crime as strong drink blunts the palate." If you look closely at the pictures on the walls of Old Dhaka, you cannot tell whether they depict terrorised faces or faces of terror. If anything, they indicate a growing sclerosis of our moral senses when one cannot draw the line between crime and consecration.

The Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli was the first to link these two when he suggested that it could be achieved only by means of a revolution that had the strength of will to liquidate its enemies. On a similar belief, General Juan Peron of Argentina had set up the Montoneros before his exile to Paraguay in 1955. During his 18-year absence, the Montoneros undertook violent urban

terrorist actions such as political kidnappings and assassinations. When Peron returned to Argentina in 1973, he lost control of the Montoneros and condemned them who in response resorted to even more violence.

From Peron's return until his widow's overthrow in 1976, the Montoneros staged an unprecedented series of kidnappings and assassinations in Argentina.

Hence, the biggest danger of political violence is that it feeds on its own terror. Saint-Just cautioned that "If Brutus does not kill others, he must kill himself." When killing is promoted as a vehicle of political cause and that cause is withdrawn, killing becomes its own cause. Albert Camus warned that a day should come when ideology would conflict with psychology. A small-time politician in Dhaka, whose party is in power, has been recently arrested as a suspect for the murder of his niece. This man may have wanted to kill so that he could grab a piece of property now that he had no better cause. Instinct, like everything else, has a break-even point to stay in business.

Phalaris, tyrant of Agragras (modern Agrigento) in Sicily was notorious for his cruelty. He is alleged to have roasted his victims alive in a bronze bull, their skulls representing the

animal's bellowing. The first victim of his cruelty was Pericles, the supposed designer of the bull. Are those faces, which ended up on the walls, architects of their own destiny? Many of them may have killed others before others killed them, turning the walls of their own neighbourhoods into neat panels of who is who in killing. That brings us to the conventional wisdom that every homicide is a suicide, because he who kills plants the seed of his own annihilation.

More than being a display of that moral lesson, the walls of Old Dhaka is the museum of our moral vacuum. When Pompey the Great organised a particularly revolting slaughter of elephants, the populace rose up and cursed him for his ruthlessness. What is our reaction to the ruthlessness writ on the walls? We stop in front of them and read the posters with the careful aloofness of museum-goers. And then saunter, perhaps with a sense of ersatz security that it did not happen to us.

Even then I would ask you to take time to look at the walls whenever you are in Old Dhaka. If you compare these walls to gravestones, the posters on them are tombstones, which commemorate not the dead but the direness of their consequences. Never mind the posters change rapidly like the tombstones in a recyclable graveyard. Come stare at them anyway and feel how death tumbles through the faces, which keep changing on those walls. You will be convinced you are not better off than they are. The walls have taken their faces, while our faces have gone to the walls.

OPINION

Let us Now Give the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina her Due

Rehana Begum

is bound to breed.

Political leaders should be selfless and to them the interest of the country should be far above that of their party and self interest. They should not consider themselves demagogues sitting in the ivory tower. I feel very sad to say that this is what our political leaders have in full measures in them. Corruption pervading the nation as painted by the Prime Minister is the cumulative result of the mental make up of our politicians as I have mentioned before.

As our Prime Minister was forthright in her statement, I therefore, do not wish to be euphemistic and would like to say in all humility that to my mind, our political leaders are for no body but for themselves, to say the least.

Bangladesh achieved independence in December 1971. Now if we take stock of our achievement over this period, we would find that in reality we have achieved very little except deluding ourselves and sowing the seeds of corruption. Bangladesh is a land of plenty but it remains a paradox be-

cause the country suffers from dearth of leadership.

However, let us not rake up the past and get down to the present in order to fight the odds out and rid the country of the social ills.

In order to achieve this Himalayan task, we must have a government free of nepotism, favouritism, parochialism. We will not give any quarters to anyone, whoever he or she might be, if his/her actions run counter to the interest of the nation. When the malaise has been identified, I like to believe the remedy will not be difficult given the serious intention.

Kamal Ataturk stood alone against the Caliph of Turkey who in his self-aggrandisement made Turkey 'the sick man of Europe'. Kamal could not care less for his own life or for anybody and put Turkey back on track and while doing so he showed no mercy and gave no quarters to any one. Before Kamal took over the reins in Turkey there prevailed a filthy anarchic situation perhaps no different from what is the state of affairs in Bangladesh

today.

It is a matter of national concern today that the educational institutions that are the source of knowledge are being defiled by greed of the political parties. Knowledge is acquired through education and no nation can be great without it. There is no gainsaying the fact that our coming generation will have to take the leadership. But if our students are misguided and remain deprived of proper education, then who will be the leaders? Then the question is whether it is the students to be blamed or the political parties? Do they not realise the far-reaching effect of this damage being done which if not stalled now will go beyond redemption?

One may, however, ask how would students learn politics then? Yes they must learn it as passive observers, without being dragged into active politics.

Student organisations do exist in all the educational institutions in all the countries even in Oxford. But the difference that it makes from ours is that it is limited to the campuses

and work for the welfare of the students in so far as their academic matter is concerned.

How painful it is to think that till today we have not been able to frame a sound education policy. If we take a look at our next door neighbour India, we will find that education system runs there smoothly and the term 'session jam' is perhaps unknown to the students there. While India continues with the legacy of the proven educational system because leaders there have given much thought and time as to how to make India economically, industrially strong we fritter away our precious time and energy on issues gainful only to them and their political parties.

I may not be in the land of the living when good sense will prevail upon our national leaders, yet I urge them to prepare our posterity so that they may be worth their salt.

Before I conclude, I crave the indulgence of our Prime Minister to say that her statement made on corruption in the parliament is not a claptrap and she really means business.

After the PM's statement, it is my firm belief that the political leaders would bend their mind to deliver goods to the people and not allow Bangladesh to become, as internationally tagged, a corrupt nation.