

## Early Warning System Flawed

CLOSELY on the heels of the floods that caught us unawares in the western districts we have had a cyclone battering us, again virtually without any advance warning. As for the flash floods it could be linked to bursting of dams in the upper riparian region under heavy rains. This, India apparently failed to notify us about, taking in the process, a flak for the coordination failure. For, a couple of years ago India and Bangladesh had mutually agreed to a flood warning mechanism whereby the latter would receive relevant information from the former at an interval of 48 hours in place of the 72-hour time-lag settled for earlier on. We didn't get the lead time for flood preparedness but it would still be worth probing as to whether we had any manoeuvrability to brace up to the calamity; and if we had, whether we used it properly.

Against this backdrop we are once again jolted into realising how precariously placed we are in terms of disaster management by reason of another forecast debacle that occurred about the cyclonic storm on Saturday.

This time it is an internal coordination pitfall between the Meteorological Department and the SPARSO, which even in their individual capacities, seemed to underestimate the dangers of such an extensive spiral what with its lessening intensity went north-easterly. There was the advantage though that both the met office and SPARSO received pictures from three satellites including the US one which hovers Bangladesh twice a day, to be able to keep the disaster management people posted about developments almost round the clock. The coordination with the field level has been extremely poor as well. Even the three days' advance notice could have been better utilised to ensure a reduced scale of losses.

The net result of all this has been that no evacuation could take place as a pre-emptive damage control exercise. All this is a pointer to the dire need for streamlining our flawed forecasting system.

## NBR Goes on Computer

THE National Board of Revenue (NBR)'s decision to computerise its taxation mechanism comes as a big stride towards checkmating corruption within its ranks and putting a stop to tax evasion. We welcome the manner in which the board is going about the monumental task of modernising the taxation network. Instead of wholesale systems renovation, major customs and excise outlets in the country, namely Customs Houses in Dhaka and Chittagong, the Inland Container Depot at Kamalapur, the Mongla seaport and the Benapole land port, will be computerised and networked in the preliminary phase. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has already been approached to have these installations networked to a central computer system within the next 15 months. Later on, the rest would be brought under the network. As we understand, with a central data bank to have access to, the customs outlet would definitely have major impetus to up their service standard. Besides, it would also facilitate the monitoring mechanism. Overall, introduction of computer network in taxation does hold promise towards enhanced collection and minimised procedural complexities.

Nevertheless, no matter how up-to-date the database is and how efficient the network, ultimately it's the tax commissioners who decide whether they want a system free of corruption and mismanagement or not. Corrupt and inefficient minds can render even the most foolproof system inefficient by blatant abuse and misuse of authority. The point we are trying to make here is that a computerised system cannot be the panacea for a state apparatus that has become a symbol of blatant corruption, sheer incompetence and shameless mismanagement over the years. The cleansing has to begin at the personnel level.

Indeed, one of the reasons that tax collection has been well below the mark could be lack of logistic and personnel support. And we are appreciative of the fact that the people at the helm have taken this crucial aspect into consideration. Decisions have already been taken to increase number of Commissioners and thereby bring more people in. The changes in tax department have been long overdue. We are really glad that it has begun on a positive note.

## Safety for Workers

YET another incident of stampede in a garment factory. This time it left 50 workers wounded at Pollicotton Knit Fabrics in Tejgaon but the message rings louder beyond the injury figure. The staircase was too narrow to take the load while they were evacuating the premises. It's quite natural that when a fire breaks out, there will be a stampede. But the fact is that these thoughts do not seem to nudge the owners of the garments units. We repeatedly suggested corrective measures every time such an accident occurred. Yet in most cases the absence of alternative exit routes, fire escape, ventilation system, fire and smoke alarm gadgets, fire extinguishers, etc., constitutes a denial of the workers' basic safety rights.

The government has extended fiscal and policy support to the garment sector - which makes it imperative for the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) to take better care of the workers. What is more to the point, it is their hard work that fetches millions of dollars in foreign exchange to the garments exporters. And a tiny fraction of it is needed to revamp the poor safety conditions of the hapless workers. Why are they not allocating that small sum for something that can - and would - only sustain for their own benefit while giving the garment workers a safer working condition? We raise this question for both the government and the BGMEA leaders to answer. For, in our view, both are responsible for the tragedies that take place. They should keep it well in mind that every time an accident occurs, their image takes another slide.

# No Let-up in Killing Spree

**Violence begets violence and spills over the borders and frontiers. Hence Bangladesh should first itself and subsequently with the help of the neighbouring countries should stop influx of arms and drugs, and collectively deal with the anti-social elements. Criminalisation of politics should be stopped forthwith. Democracy should be given a fresh lease of life through ensuring peace, stability and security. Otherwise Bangladesh will continue to remain an economic laggard in South Asia with all hopes of self-sustained development dashed to the ground.**

political leaders and activists, journalists, students, housewives, advocates, businessmen, officials and ordinary citizens. If killing of over sixty thousand people in Sri Lanka in 17 years and about eighty thousand in the India-controlled Jammu and Kashmir can be termed as the direct outcome of long standing civil wars how can one then term the murder of nearly twenty thousand people in Bangladesh in about four and a half years time? Most of the killings are alleged to be political in nature - the power group trying to physically liquidate its opponents and vice versa. As if a frenzy of killing has gripped the interested groups and nothing could deter them.

Former finance minister and BNP presidium member Saifur Rahman said it has now become dangerously unsafe to go out of one's house after dusk. It is also not safe even inside the house. Grills are broken open and crimes committed. Murders are taking place in broad day light and no place, not even courts and hospitals, are at present safe. No body knows whose turn will come next. A sense of insecurity now prevails among all segments of the society. Perhaps natural death is what the people are clamouring for. The government is constitutionally bound to safeguard the life and property of every citizen in the country.

When Sheikh Hasina took oath of office as the Prime Minister she had declared vociferously that her very first priority would be to restore law and order and combat terrorism. Instead of any sign of improvement, the law and order situation has further deteriorated and has literally reached the nadir. Everybody is

murders and other crimes. The police usually remain bystanders and in their turn are earning the wrath of the common masses whose only aspiration now seems to be able to sleep in peace.

As already stated, killings are committed by various interest

maintain their supremacy. After the killing of Murgil Milan, alleged to be a notorious criminal who used to pose as a youth leader of the ruling party a minister accompanied his body to its final resting place perhaps as a mark of 'solidarity' and honour.

Goons, and not administration control, localities, upzilas and zilas and the ordinary people have become hostages in their hands. They have their armouries and private torture chambers. In most of the cases killers remain unarrested and roam freely. The police also frame charges in such a way under coercion or lure of the killers are arrested they immediately get bails. The people are no longer prone to believe whatever is dished out to them through the controlled electronic media and the sponsored write-ups and official handouts.

Of late Bangladesh has become a lucrative market for the smuggled arms and weapons (and drugs). Arms are coming through various routes from across the border with India and Myanmar as well as by ship. According to an unofficial but reliable estimate there are as many as seven hundred thousand illegal arms in possession of various groups and people and the flow of illegal arms smuggling continues unabated. Many in the country are apprehensive that during the

elections which is all around the corner there is a to be serious outbreak of armed clashes among various contending parties and groups for maintaining their sway and dominance. There is gloomy predictions that unprecedented violence might mar and seriously jeopardise the 2001 parliamentary polls and thereby making the fledgling democracy further vulnerable.

Not only democracy, rather the whole existence of the nation will be at stake due to the toleration of murders, rapes and crimes. A country which emerged through a glorious war of liberation should not have been pushed to such a pitfall. Violence begets violence and spills over the borders and frontiers. Hence Bangladesh should first itself and subsequently with the help of the neighbouring countries should stop influx of arms and drugs, and collectively deal with the anti-social elements. Criminalisation of politics should be stopped forthwith. Democracy should be given a fresh lease of life through ensuring peace, stability and security. Otherwise Bangladesh will continue to remain an economic laggard in South Asia with all hopes of self-sustained development dashed to the ground. The killing spree unleashed by the Frankenstein of different interested groups will eventually gobble up their creators. This is the lesson of history, and yet another lesson of history is that nobody takes lesson from history. Should Bangladesh turn into a country where every body should be armed to protect himself or herself as in the *jirgas* of Pakistan or some states in Latin America?

## HEART OF THE MATTER

Mansoor Mamoon

of the opinion that never before it was so bad.

There had been a change of guard in the home ministry along with several reshuffles in the police administration. The controversial Public Safety Act (PSA) was adopted amidst much hullabaloo. 'Block raids', 'combing operations' and other high sounding words were heard for the umpteenth time. But nothing seems to be working. The crime rate including that of murder is constantly on the rise. Dhaka, Laxmipur, Narayanganj, Satkhira etc have turned into crime zones. Godfathers posing as self-proclaimed satraps are in virtual control of the administration in many places. Sons of the high-ups following the dictum of 'like father like son' are also involved in committing

groups, by the godfathers and their hirelings who belong to the ruling party as well as the opposition. Smugglers, loan defaulters and owners of black money are also in league. It is a vicious cycle of crimes and counter-crimes, killings and counter-killings. Because of the political clouts of these killers the police in most of the cases cannot take any action. Sometimes the police themselves are involved. When the police are politicised and when they are made or go corrupt none can expect that the law and order situation would improve. The number of police and the logistic support they are provided with often proved to be inadequate compared to that of the gangsters. Many of the influential political leaders now nurture armed brigands to

## LETTER FROM AMERICA

# The Battle for Jerusalem

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

**It is so easy to make the case for the Muslim supervision of the holy sites in Jerusalem. As followers of the religion that teaches to respect all the prophets equally, Muslims are the only people bound by faith to preserve, protect and respect all sites that commemorate Prophets Jesus, Moses (peace be upon them) and all others.**

partner in peace, Shimon Peres, the voters in 1996 elected the right-wing demagogue and the wrecker of peace, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Soon after his election, Netanyahu tested the resolve of the Palestinians and the world's Muslim community by opening a tunnel alongside the Haram al-

the Americans have difficulty in understanding that Muslims are bound to 'Haram al-Sharif by faith; no one can negotiate away the sovereignty over it. Nevertheless the peace process was proceeding gingerly, until Ariel Sharon, 'the butcher of Shabra and Shatilla,' entered the scene.

The leader of Israel's hawkish

claim to it. Sharon did not enter the compound as a humble visitor, but as an arrogant conqueror. His statements to the contrary notwithstanding, Sharon did not enter Haram al-Sharif in peace; he declared war on the Palestinians and the Muslims.

War is what Israel got. For the second time in four years. Likud's

life in the first place? Why is the Palestinian landscape dotted with Israeli settlements? Israel has no honourable answer for any of these questions.

American politicians, who profess eternal love for Israel and contempt for the Arabs, have been blaming the Palestinian victims for the violence. No one has blamed Sharon, the real instigator, the real mastermind of the violence and the real destroyer of peace. Instead of speaking the truth, Ehud Barak came to Sharon's defence. Politicians in Israel and America continue to blame Yasir Arafat for the violence. They have accused the Palestinian children of making Israel look bad by dying under Israeli machinegun fire. No Muslim wants to harm Jewish children. Why are the Israeli soldiers so determined to prove their manhood by massacring Palestinian children? As with Benjamin Netanyahu, after setting Palestine aflame and orchestrating violence, Ariel Sharon is about to reap the rewards. As of this writing, Barak is courting Sharon to join a national unity government.

To no one's surprise American politicians and the media shamelessly toe the Israeli line. A case in point is the death of the two Israeli soldiers who were reportedly 'lost' in Ramallah. Muslims all over the world were shocked to see the photograph of Palestinians rejoicing after the beating murder of the two Israeli soldiers under Palestinian police custody. Murder of a prisoner in custody is totally unIslamic. The Palestinian side of the story, however, was never reported. As occupiers, Israeli soldiers know every nook and cranny of every Palestinian village and town; therefore, their getting 'lost' is suspicious. Palestinians say that Israeli death squads routinely dress as Palestinians, infiltrate the masses and murder Palestinians under order from the Israeli government. The two 'lost' soldiers were such undercover agents who got caught. While Palestinian anger against such agents is understandable, it does not justify their

murder. It was equally wrong for the Press to ignore the Palestinian side of the story.

American American politicians President Clinton, whom Yasir Arafat calls a 'friend,' has been the most even-handed. Among the Presidential candidates, the Republican candidate Texas Governor George W. Bush is less hostile towards the Muslims than the Democratic candidate Vice President Al Gore, who is 100 per cent kosher. American Muslims have their work cut out for them. Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Senatorial candidate from New York, has returned campaign contributions from American Muslim Alliance for their alleged link to the militant group Hamas.

The Palestinians are at the forefront of the Muslims' struggle to preserve the sanctity of Islam's third holiest site. They deserve support. American Muslims are doing all they can. A few years ago it would have been unthinkable for Muslims to demonstrate in favour of the Palestinians in front of the Israeli Consulate in New York City. They did just that, a few weeks ago, after saying the Juma prayers on the pavement. On October 28, they organised a march on Washington, DC in support of Palestinian Jerusalem with participation of Muslim men, women and children from all over America.

America has it both ways in the Middle East. Israel is praised to the hilt because it is the only genuine democracy in the region (although 20% of Israel's population, the Israeli Arabs, would dispute that), as though without democracy people are less human. On the other hand, whenever America wants something done or said, it picks up the phone and tells an unelected President here (who is beholden to America for his survival) or an unelected 'King' there (whose lofty position would be history without America's backing) what should be done or said, for example, at an Arab League conference. Until Muslims in the Middle East are allowed to elect leaders who represent the views of their people, the masses will be continued to be sold short.

It is so easy to make the case for the Muslim supervision of the holy sites in Jerusalem. As followers of the religion that teaches to respect all the prophets equally, Muslims are the only people bound by faith to preserve, protect and respect all sites that commemorate Prophets Jesus, Moses (peace be upon them) and all others.



**Volatile ME: Israeli tanks target stone-throwing protesters**

Sharif compound. Palestine exploded, and in the ensuing gun battle over 80 Palestinians lost their lives to Israeli bullets. By 1998, when Netanyahu refused to implement the Wye River accord, it was clear even to President Clinton that Netanyahu had no interest in peace. In an election early last year, Ehud Barak was elected Prime Minister of Israel on a platform of peace with the Palestinians and withdrawal from south Lebanon.

Although not as committed as Rabin, Barak's interest in peace seemed genuine. At the Camp David conference last July an agreement with the Palestinians appeared near but floundered on the question of sovereignty over Haram al-Sharif. The Israelis and

Likud party, Ariel Sharon, is the most hated Israeli among the Palestinians. In 1982, Lebanese Christian militias massacred thousands of Palestinian men, women and children at the Shabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Lebanon under Sharon's watch. Even Israel's own investigation found Sharon liable. Alarmed that the move towards peace may be irreversible, in late September, Sharon met with Barak and obtained his permission to visit the Haram al-Sharif.

Jews visit Haram al-Sharif everyday; the writer has seen that with his own eyes. On September 28, Sharon entered Haram al-Sharif not to pay his respects to the Muslim holy sites, but to lay

attempt to test the commitment of Palestinians and Muslims to the Haram al-Sharif has backfired. Palestine erupted in anger. The cost to the Palestinians has been exceedingly high. As of writing of this piece 150 Palestinians and Israeli Arabs - a third of them children - have been shot dead by Israeli soldiers. Israeli soldiers and settlers have no qualms about shooting dead Palestinian children; what they worry about is the world's reaction. When the death toll reaches 500 or 1000, the world is going to ask: if both sides are to blame equally for the violence, why is only one side, the Palestinians, getting killed? Why is Israel occupying Palestinian cities and villages, and controlling every aspect of Palestinian

## To the Editor ...

### Concerning Saarc

Sir, The recent Saarc seminar in Dhaka, conducted by the non-governmental agencies (DS report, October 25) sounds promising. Things appear to work better and faster in this divided South Asian region without initially involving the politicians.

Now the foreigners are taking interest to break the impasse, and make Saarc respond to friendly gestures from outside the region. The EU and the Germans took an active part at this seminar, which means that the US might be backing up in the subsequent phases.

The Indo-Pakistan dispute should not stand in the way of strengthening the internal activities within the region, to break down the invisible walls which we

carry as hang-over from the British days. Britain is discreetly keeping itself away and acting in low profile, considering the sensitivity of the past colonial rule.

The recent unusual floods in West Bengal and South-west Bangladesh have confronted us with the stark reality that we need an integrated basin development plan to be jointly administered by the member nations. These water and flood control projects will take years to mature; hence the first phase must be in place right now. The main beneficiaries will be the farmers, the agricultural backbone of every nation.

The three per cent of trading by the member nation within the Saarc region has to go up to 30 per cent as quickly as possible,

but where are the guidelines and cooperation? The political hurdles will always be there, but if the British Indian empire could be run for 200 years, why we cannot take advantage of the cumulative experience in the region?

But the irony is that we cannot do without the politicians. The question is: the politicians are on which side?

AH  
Dhaka

### Private shops and public roads

Sir, The traffic system of the metropolitan city is deteriorating day by day but the authority concerned remains as indifferent

as ever.

Not to speak of hawkers, vendors illegally occupying public thoroughfares and trucks, buses, cars and rickshaws parked to and fro. Almost every shopkeeper at Nawabpur Road, Azimpur Road, New Market, Chokkibazar, Bait-ul-Mukarram, Thattari Bazar, Gulshan Market etc, are illegally occupying vast areas of public roads, pavements, and streets in front of their respective shops for displaying, storing and selling their varieties of goods blocking the movement of the people.

Time to time we see some police officials and constables evicting poor hawkers and vendors from public roads and footpaths but surprisingly we never find any action being taken by

DCC or DMP against the shopkeepers for illegally occupying public roads, streets and pavements creating untold suffering and difficulties for the members of public.

Is there no administration in Dhaka to look into the relevant matters and to take necessary action in the interest of public service? We wonder if the authorities concerned are simply long on rhetoric but short on substance.

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### Effect of terrorism

Sir, When your close relative becomes a victim of terrorism and succumbs to it you can never remain normal after that. It is such a big trauma to one's psy-

che. Can you expect that person to remain reasonable and rational after that blow?

His whole state of mind is bound to be affected, become numb or over reactive, but not remain as before.

Question is, are such persons capable of taking responsibilities or making decisions in the right way? Should such responsibilities be heaped upon them? For if they make wrong moves it might hurt other people.

Now we will be having scores of such people in our society as country given the rate at which terrorism is increasing day by day.

A Worried Citizen  
Dhaka