

## Stop this spiralling violence

*PM should prove true to her words*

**P**OLITICAL violence has taken a toll of nearly two dozen lives in the last fortnight. Policemen, political activists, ordinary citizens, and even railway passengers fell victim to it. One has lost count of the number of injured people.

The rather commonplace occurrences of stone-pelting, cracker-bursting, sniping and transport smashing or burning have been overtaken by planted bomb mayhem, sabotage on railway lines, derailment of trains, and even attack on a standing carriage as at the Sylhet railway station during the hartal day before yesterday.

There has been law enforcement related firing as in Brahmanbaria and firing from processions as in Dhaka. Political clashes were reported from Mymensingh, Tangail, Sirajganj, Bhairab, and Savar. The cycle of violence could expand from funeral processions and politics on dead bodies.

We have to stop this spiral of political anarchy here and now or court a dangerous drift towards a point of no return. How do we ensure a pull-back from the precipice?

**Do we have something to pin our hopes on after what the Prime Minister has said at the AL Central Committee meeting held on Wednesday to discuss the adverse Malibagh expose suffered by her party the day before? Only if the PM acts on what she said.**

Not content with merely chastising her party MP Iqbal for his role, Sheikh Hasina has even issued a directive calling for the arrest of all terrorists spotted on the photographs published by newspapers on the day. We have seen prime minister's instructions going unheeded before, either by an act of default, dared due to leniency, or because some of those orders sent a mixed signal to the people concerned.

We are not expecting a similar fate to her latest directive, the stake being higher this time around. Even so, we urge the PM to put her verbal orders in black and white and address it to the home minister, if she has not done it already, so that we can see those photographed criminals put behind the bar.

That said, we counsel the ruling party and the opposition to immediately enter into a one-point code of conduct making sure that processionists for and against hartal shall, under no circumstances, carry any weapons on their person.

What will be of paramount importance though, is a renunciation of muscle-play and violence as methods of politics by the ruling party. The primary responsibility devolves on them to do so in view of the power and machinery they have to be ham-handed with the opposition. The ruling party has to lead the way for the other political parties to follow suit. Definitely, there is a lot to be said about the broad opposition's nurture of armed politics and their occasional muscle-flexing to have their way. Hence, we expect that both the ruling party and the BNP-led opposition should publicly abjure the path of violence clearly opting for a course of action that will help, rather than hinder, the initiation of the process culminating in the next general election.

# Murder in the mosque



**HASNAT ABDUL HYE**

**"N**O one carries arms into the house of Lord," Beckett told the armed intruders indignantly. The reply of the king's men was sharp and swift. In silent contempt they thrust their bared swords into his body. They did unto Caesar what was Caesar's but none to their god. A holy place, god's house, was desecrated with gushing blood, in cold blood. No amount of self-flagellation by the repentant King nor holy pilgrimage later would erase the bloody blot wrought on history. Murder in the cathedral still cries out, not for revenge, but for repentance and soul searching.

It is not known what transpired in the mind of police constable Badsha Mia before falling dead on the floor of the mosque splattered with his own blood. Being a lesser mortal his words were in all probability not lofty and sublime. With death staring him in the face he may have begged for his life and frantically asked for mercy from his assailants. He did not have time or perhaps reason to think of God even while in His house because what he was facing was the inhumanity and cruelty of his fellow beings. He must have shouted and cried in great panic. His unarmed hands may have tried to shield his head from the fatal blows coming thick and fast from all directions. But these were of no avail. Without any portent or warning, suddenly his time was up and for no good reason at all. He was a "king's man" alright, but he did not enter God's house with any diabolic

design. Though the mosque was the place where he went to pray before, this time, at the moment of truth, he was there against his will. He was hounded and dragged there by a pack of hungry wolves thirsty for blood. As in the animal world, the hunter and the hunted did not know each other before. Nor were there any old scores to settle. His death was purely an accident. Anybody else's life sacrificed would have sufficed to quench the thirst for blood. His just happened to be available then and there. If serendipity rendered Badsha

comprised novices undergoing religious studies is the greatest shock of all. Are not they being taught and trained on ways of saving the lives of fellow beings from evil and sin with God's words of mercy and with assurance his blessings? If yes, how could they surrender love and compassion to warring anger and blind hatred? How could they have done in a fellow who had done them no harm? And of all places how could this happen in the mosque where God's presence is overpowering? Did they in their twisted minds think that mosque being holy can also be the

and correctness of acts. They had come a long way in the slow but steady process of indoctrination of their minds. And also manipulation of their muscle power. They had become monsters psychologically conditioned to kill, like the Manchurian Candidate in the film. Their victim could be anyone as long as he was not one of them. If he belonged to their perceived adversaries, so much the better. **The murderers in the mosque proved to be efficient trainees, they responded well to their indoctrination. The pulling of wires from**

**hapless victim. In their dizzying madness and spiralling anger they did not know what they were doing. In the eyes of law they are culpable for their crime. But society should hold their mentors more responsible because of the hold they have over the impressionable minds. They sowed the seeds of hatred, their followers reaped the harvest of blood.**

The murder in the mosque, therefore, is an occasion to look into the religious educational institutions, the educational system and

antist elements in madrassahs bent on blocking progress. Teaching methods, the teachers and the physical environment must be conducive to the upbringing of new generation conscious of their positive role in society and acquiring competence to perform the same. These should not be left to the decisions of people having narrow and vested interests. The curriculum of madrassah education should be brought closer to modern education so that students have wider employment opportunities beyond the traditional ones that capitalise on religion only. Some teachers in madrassah should be from non-madrassah institutions on deputation for fixed terms. This will diversify the educational milieu within the madrassahs mixing secular and religious ideas or at least moderating fanaticism. The residential facilities where various abuses are said to take place should be regularly inspected. In short, religious education in madrassahs should be mainstreamed keeping their religious character intact. A government that fails to do these should be accused of political expediency and cynical indifference.

If attention turns to the root cause of anger and hatred felt by madrassah students towards others, the death of Badsha Mia, though meaningless at first sight, will not be in vain. Through reform madrassah students and their mentors need to be assured that their future is linked to that of the nation and for accepting this perspective they will be none the worse. Their status, influence and respect in society should not continue to be based on obscurantist and fanatical role. They should not feel threatened as long as they address fellow being with the love of God. They forgot this while bludgeoning Badsha Mia to death inside the mosque. It should not happen again. The murder in the mosque cries out for both repentance and soul searching.

## IN MY VIEW

**Through reform madrassah students and their mentors need to be assured that their future is linked to that of the nation and for accepting this perspective they will be none the worse. Their status, influence and respect in society should not continue to be based on obscurantist and fanatical role. They should not feel threatened as long as they address fellow beings with the love of God. They forgot this while bludgeoning Badsha Mia to death inside the mosque. It should not happen again. The murder in the mosque cries out for both repentance and soul searching.**

Mia's death somewhat meaningless, the place of occurrence resonated with contradictions. It was a mosque where people like Badsha Mia go to pray and meditate. Simply being inside it one's spirit is lifted up by ethereal bliss. The faithfuls invoke God's blessings to help them tread the narrow and straight path of rectitude. It is a place redolent with eternal love and boundless mercy. Clerics and novices use this revered place to assure the faithfuls of God's blessings in their practice of virtue and piety. But the motley mob frenzied by blind hatred and seething anger forgot the larger-than-life significance of the place. Their failure to recognise the sanctity of the mosque and its spiritual guidance over their daily lives was made all the more stark by the fact of their being so close to it on a daily basis in terms of their spiritual work. That the angry mob bent on spilling blood till the body of the victim bled white

safest place for the most heinous of crimes and that they would be exonerated from guilt because of their guardianship over it?

It would be unfair to say that the assailants of Badsha Mia killed in cold blood. Being a frenzied mob they were caught up in a group-hysteria. Paranoid feeling and persecution psychosis instilled into their mind day in day out goaded them on. Anger boiling over in individual minds over imagined wrongs or potential threats blended them into a ferocious mob blind with fury. At that point of their physical existence there was a transformation of their minds. Animal passion took over rationality. Bestiality scoffed at humanity. They were no longer in control of their selves, nor conscious of the magnitude of the crime being committed. They were oblivious of their duty to consecrate the mosque with purity of thoughts

**behind by their mentors, the puppeteers, became a resounding success**

At a more fundamental level, therefore, the assailants of Badsha Mia were not responsible for what they did. **It is the process of indoctrination and teaching that they are subjected to that hold the key to the diabolical mind that they come to have at selective and pre-determined moments. The atrocious treatment including corporal punishments that they reportedly receive at the hands of their mentors during training also go a long way in explaining their lapses into dehumanisation. In being conditioned psychologically to react against perceived enemies on that fateful day they were behaving like programmed robots. Their minds and body had been manipulated over a long period to prepare them to hunt down a quarry and pounce on the**

the methods of training that turn out madrassah students by the thousands every year. More importantly, the future promised for them at the end of this education needs to be looked at critically because perceived threat to that future may have been drummed up by their mentors and thus may also be responsible for acts of revenge. Since the government gives considerable financial aid to madrassah education it has the right and obligation to look into the whole range of issues involved, from social and political points of view. It cannot turn a blind eye to whatever goes on in the name of religious education and takes place inside the institutions imparting it. Neither a hands-off policy nor complacency will absolve it of its responsibility to oversee religious education more closely. Society cannot see with equanimity its resources being squandered in turning out Franksteins or obscu-

# Religion and irreligion



**MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN**

**I**T is not so important to take sides as it is to ask why do they fight. On the one side are the religious scholars and their followers, who claim to be god's vicars on earth. On the other side are the liberal-minded people, the champions of civil society who would not tolerate abuse of human dignity in the name of religion. Lately, things came to a head between them as they vowed to extirpate each other.

But why? Why would they want to take to the streets in violent showdowns to spill blood? Albert Camus writes in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, "If absolute truth belongs to anyone in this world, it certainly does not belong to the man or party that claims to possess it." How do we explain the madness of people who are ready to kill or die because they believe that truth is in their possession? For one side, truth is inlaid in the sacrifice of temporal life for the eternal, and they see it in their duties to enforce

that sacrifice. Another side, where our NGOs and intellectuals huddle, argues that eternal values don't apply to temporal issues all the time, and, therefore, the mullahs ought to be prohibited in their exercise of Islamic edicts or *fatwas*.

Those who contend that life on earth is bound by religious precepts are called the fundamentalists, the term, which generally means people who are in strict adherence to their ideas and principles. The usage of the term in the religious context is derived from fundamentalism, a movement in American Protestantism that arose in the early part of the 20th century in reaction to Modernism. It stressed the infallibility of the Bible not only in the matters of faith and morals but also as a literal historical record.

But the conflict between religious exegesis and temporal exigency goes way back in time, when a reformer named Martin Luther drew up the Ninety-five Theses, "for the purpose of eliciting truth," and is said to have nailed them on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1517. That was the beginning of a new era when reformation of the old religious order, espoused with the renaissance spirit of humanism, made man, not god, the center of the universe. Pico della Mirandola, who propounded humanism in the 15th century, laid emphasis upon

man's personal responsibility and on the possibility of his self-creation as work of art.

Prior to that there was a long history of tension between the clergy and the laity not because there was any dispute over the existence of god, but because men were divided amongst them whether god's existence should have any bearing on how man consolidated his power on earth. Machiavelli was dismayed to observe how the precepts of Christianity had made the Italian states sluggish and weak. He regarded religion as an indispensable component of human life, but statecraft as a discipline based on its own rules, which couldn't be subordinated to religion any more than jurisprudence or medicine.

Hence, the separation of church and state was proclaimed during the French Revolution as a result of bitter social revolutionary criticism against the wealthy ecclesiastical hierarchy. The separation of church and state was also achieved during and after the American Revolution as a result of ideas arising from the struggle of the Puritans against the English episcopal system and the English throne. In the wake of its separation from church, the French state took over education and other hitherto churchly functions of a civic nature. In the US, the constitution

set the church free from state supervision, a maximum freedom in the realisation of its spiritual, moral, and educational tasks. The separation of church and state in the Soviet Union and the countries under its sphere of influence was based upon an opposite tendency. The attempt was to totally exterminate the church and to replace it with nationalism.

Curiously, Hitler in Germany showed paradoxical contradictions. Nazi propaganda pursued a consciously anti-Christian polemic against the church by arresting those clergy who opposed the Nazi worldview and policies. But, on the other hand, Hitler placed the greatest value upon concluding a concordat with the Vatican in 1934 that granted more special rights to the Roman Catholic Church in the German Reich than ever before. The concordat with the Vatican represented the first recognition of the Hitler regime by a European government and was viewed by Hitler as a method of entrance into the circle of internationally recognised political powers.

Thus religion has been exploited at times for less-than-holier reasons as much as such reasons have been used in the name of religion. If the mullahs have unlawfully and abusively used *fatwas* to stone fornicating men or women and to

annul and anoint marriages, it appears like a throwback of inquisition in Roman Catholicism, which was instituted by Pope Gregory IX in 1231 for the apprehension and trial of heretics.

The inquisitorial procedure was quite detailed; but, in general terms, it gave a person suspected of heresy time to confess and absolve himself, and, failing this, the accused was haled before the inquisitor and interrogated and tried, with the testimony of witnesses. The use of torture to obtain confessions and the names of other heretics was at first rejected but was authorised in 1252 by Pope Innocent IV. On admission or conviction of guilt, a person could be sentenced publicly to any of a wide variety of penalties, ranging from simple prayer and fasting to confiscation of property and imprisonment, even life imprisonment. Condemned heretics who refused to recant, as well as those who relapsed after condemnation and repentance, were turned over to the secular arm, which alone could impose the death penalty.

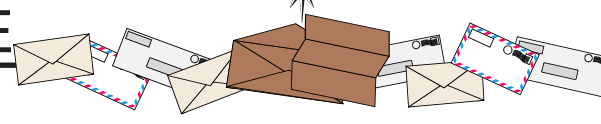
In a time when the country faces acute law and order problem, the mullahs perhaps go overboard with their *fatwas*, which flout the existing legal system. But the most disappointing thing is that they keep their

inquisitorial interference only to men and women who are guilty of consensual lapses. What about other vices like corruption, extortion, chicanery and falsehood? Why cannot they issue *fatwas* against those grand aberrations? Nobody would mind if they strengthened the hand of law to suppress these horrible crimes.

Pascal once said, "A man doesn't show his greatness by being at one extremity, but rather by touching both at once." In true sense of the word, both the clerics and their opponents are fundamentalists because they strictly adhere to their respective beliefs and ideals. Each is confined to its own extremity and doesn't touch the other end. Religion is a set of beliefs, which explains the purpose of this life as a preparation for the next life. What is that preparation like when this life is immersed in blood and violence?

Both sides need to understand one thing that faith and reason must ultimately come to an equilibrium point. Faith is inductive, while reason is deductive and it is the level of understanding, which climbs up and down. Unless either side touches both ends at once, one will not understand the other. That is bound to happen in the course of time only if one side simply learns to respect the other. Believe me, that makes all the difference between religion and irreligion.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



### PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

#### Safeguards against future shocks



STAR PHOTO: A K M MOHSIN

Nearly 80 per cent of structures in Dhaka are vulnerable to shocks. Like Gujarat, Bangladesh is also earthquake prone. RAJUK must enforce building codes for new structures, and survey existing ones for faults. Other measures for earthquake readiness, such as equipment to measure tremors and cope with emergencies, must be undertaken. We urge the ministries concerned to take up this matter seriously.

#### We can rely on the President

There is much speculation about the possible resignation of President Shahabuddin Ahmed. A provocative remark from the Prime Minister is the cause behind this.

I believe there is nothing to be apprehensive about. We have full trust in the President, in his wisdom, knowledge and farsightedness. Provocative words would not have any effect on his sound judgement. He will not forsake the people who are looking up him for respite from the prevailing turmoil in the country.

**Nur Jahan Chittagong**

#### Who killed the constable?

The brutal murder of a policeman at a city mosque in Dhaka is shocking. We are concerned that the real culprits will not be apprehended. The matter is still under investigation but the entire government of Sheikh Hasina is pointing fingers at their political opponents, especially the IOJ.

The investigation should be undertaken by a one or two-member judicial committee. Under normal circumstances, it would not have been necessary but unfortunately the police in recent years have lost whatever little credibility it had been enjoying in the past.

We would like to know where the constable was killed, inside or outside the mosque? If inside the mosque, why did he enter the

mosque alone, without informing his colleagues? We don't know what happened but we would appreciate it if the government of Sheikh Hasina stopped pointing its finger at anybody --- unless they are proven guilty.

**Mohammad Sarwaruddin Bergen, Norway**

#### Washroom etiquette

Every year a large number of pilgrims fly to Jeddah to perform Haj. The air journey takes about five to six hours. Most of them are from the villages and have no idea how to use a modern and small washroom in an aircraft. They splash water and litter the floor, making the washroom unusable for others. From experience I have observed that within an hour of take off, washrooms become unusable. Other passengers have to suffer during the long journey to Jeddah.

I would request our Religious Affairs Ministry, the Haj Camp Authority, Dhaka and Haj travel agents in our country to teach all prospective Hajis from the villages the basic rules of using a modern washroom and lavatory. The airlines officials told us that only Bangladeshi Hajis create such a nuisance on board. It is time we took corrective action to improve our image.

**M. Rahman Dhaka**

#### Uttara killing

Congratulations to you for the front-

page report "Dipu moves freely but police say 'untraceable'." The truth is that on Thursday night, February 8, 2001, Taraj Uddin (popularly known as Taru Mia) of Dakohinpara, Dakashin Khan, Uttara was shot and killed by the accomplices of Dipu Chowdhury.

The Taru Mia killing has actually allegedly happened over land now valued at Tk 80 lakh and other matters, involving a gang leader Mukul who was arrested and then released. These are two glaring examples of how justice has been mocked. The arrest and subsequent release of Mukul and the culpability of the 'untraceable' Dipu Chowdhury in the killing need to be dug out and the truth revealed to provide a sense of security to citizens.

Does the Prime Minister know the facts as given above? Will she institute a judicial independent enquiry and investigation team headed by a justice who would be selected by President Shahabuddin?

**Vox Populi Dhaka**

#### Peace at night

Aviation law prohibits aircraft from flying over cities and populated areas. But this law is not honoured over Dhaka city by fighters, freighters, helicopters and above all by the airlines. All the chiefs are well aware of it. Air traffic has increased and especially on some nights of the week, after take-off from runway 14 from Zia International Airport, airlines take a right turn at 1000 feet

over Baridhara, Gulshan, DOHS. They shake up and wake up the entire area with their loud noise at much too low an altitude, almost the whole night.

May I request the Chairman of CAAB to change the SID (Standard Instrument Department) for the west bound flights using Runway 14 of ZIA to turn left after take-off. Better still if the surface wind is below 10 knots, would they kindly use Runway 32 for take-off.

**Mazhar Haq Gulshan, Dhaka**

#### Sound and Light Show

The government is building the Shadinata Minar in Suhrawardy Uddan where our beloved leader announced our cry for freedom. May I request the government to present our history with a Sound and Light Show at this venue. It could start from the creation of Pakistan up to the incumbent government, including the atrocities by the Pakistanis, the language movement, the six point movement, anti-Agartala case movement, the killing of Bangabandhu, Maj Gen Zia ur Rahman's take over and killing, Maj Gen H Ershad's take over, and other milestones.

Other countries have this interesting way of presenting history. India at the Red Fort in Delhi, Egypt at the pyramids in Giza. Why don't we have it as well?

**Mazhar Haq Dhaka**