

Hostage issue in a bind

Utmost caution needed

TEN days into the hostage crisis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the fate of the three Europeans—two Danes and a Briton—remains as murky as ever. While the abductors, supposedly members of an organisation opposed to the CHT Peace Accord, continue to skip talks on one pretext after another, the government appears to be running out of ideas. Thursday's police raid at Guzarpara in Kalapahar range and subsequent arrest of 30 people, six of them reportedly relatives of the kidnappers, one must say, was not the smartest thing to do under the circumstances. The action, premature and ill-planned as it sounded, has not hopefully pushed the situation out of control. Fortunately, it hasn't induced any untoward riposte from the abductors. However, the raid has resulted in the snapping of the previously used channel of communication with the kidnappers. CHT Affairs Minister Kalparanjan Chakma's express optimism as regards establishing "a direct contact with the abductors" by Sunday has been well-taken as a sign for an early resolution of the crisis.

Cordon off the mountain range, sealing off all exit points, keeping commandos ready to go into action and the two-day deadline issued to abductors for the release of hostages are all part of the negotiation game blended with pressure and we understand that. But given the taut nerves across the board one has to apply utmost discretion in such matters. For, any such plan can go haywire, if there is lack of co-ordination. So far, there have been instances where lack of co-ordination appeared on the surface. Besides, some distractions and side-talks have been indulged in by people dealing with the hostage situation. These need to be avoided.

The raid on a village and the two-day ultimatum for the abductors to release the captive foreigners have indubitably signalled further toughening of the authorities' position. Yet, the new phase of negotiations that has been initiated raises the hope that it will be patiently and astutely brought to a successful conclusion. The authorities must remember that their primary objective is to keep the communication channel open until they are in a position to secure the release of hostages. We would urge them to exercise utmost caution for the sake of welfare and freedom of the foreigners being held in captivity.

Borneo ethnic riots

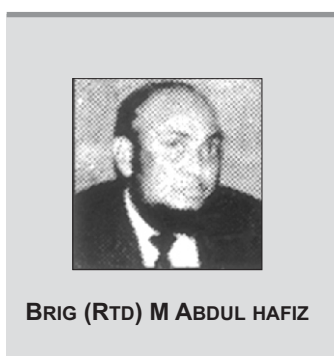
We hope for return of order

THE eruption of indiscriminate and barbaric attacks on Madurese settlers in Indonesian Borneo is a matter of deep concern. Nearly 40,000 settlers have fled their homes and at least 270 have been brutally killed, either burned alive or hacked to death by the indigenous Dayaks. Security forces have been slow to respond and have failed to stem the onslaught of mob violence, including unimaginable atrocities being committed in broad daylight. In one horrifying instance, a man was reportedly decapitated in a market place while police unsuccessfully fired warning shots to disperse the attackers. The brutality of the riots and the communal nature of the conflict are equally disconcerting. We hope that the authorities will respond with alacrity to restore order and protect innocent lives. More troops are expected to arrive in the area and we hope this would help quell the violence.

Of particular concern is the plight of thousands of fleeing Madurese who are reported to be still trapped in the port city of Sampit, awaiting evacuation to safety. Gangs of Dayaks armed with machetes and daggers are roaming the city and surrounding villages. We hope that the Indonesian authorities will intensify their response to protect and evacuate the homeless Madurese.

Violence erupted on several occasions in the past between the indigenous Dayaks and Madurese settlers, who were brought to central Kalimantan province in Borneo under a government resettlement programme two decades ago. The Dayaks resented the relative affluence of the settlers who had received land grants from the government and occupied civil service posts. It would be highly desirable for the Indonesian government to undertake long-term solutions, addressing the ingredients for communal disharmony. We sincerely hope that the government will diffuse the immediate tension in Borneo and take steps to avoid further bloodshed in the future.

Bombing of Baghdad: Portending period of new anxiety



BRIG (RTD) M ABDUL HAFIZ

A massive air raid by twentyfour US and British aircraft struck Iraq's air defence installation near Baghdad killing two civilians and wounding twenty others on 17 February last. This is the first major air attacks against Iraq since Desert Fox, a four day bombing campaign by the US and Britain in December 1998. The streaks are believed to be in response to recent Iraqi efforts to install sophisticated radar system around Baghdad to coordinate surface to air missile attacks against the intruding patrol aircraft. Pentagon called the strike a 'routine mission' undertaken as a self defence measure by the US forces in the Persian gulf. While the action was supported by the US allies the world leaders as well as most of the Arab countries including the Arab League condemned the attack.

One of the first acts of Clinton presidency the launching of a cruise missile attack in 1994 was attributed more to nervousness of his relationship with the Pentagon whom he presumably wanted to quieten because of his draft-

dodging in Vietnam war. What exactly prompted President Bush to launch this highly provocative attack within only four weeks of his installation at a time when things were moving ominously towards a confrontation following the apparent failure of the peace process in the Middle East, is yet to be clearly understood. But the formation of his team giving it the illusion of a 'rain-bow coalition' is a pointer to the gathering storm over the Middle

east particularly in its Gulf region. The advantage inherent in the ethnic diversity of Bush's nominees in the cabinet is immediately neutralised by their ideological perversity. It is ironic indeed that the reemergence into public life of Vice President Dick Cheney and the Secretary of State Collin Powell, the architects of the Gulf War, have coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Desert Storm.

Dick Cheney was the Secretary of Defence during the Desert Storm. It is widely believed that during the incumbency of a lack lustre President Bush he would effectively

call the shots. The new Secretaries of State and Defence, General Powell and Donald Rumsfeld are also former Republican apparatchik. The General as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was regarded as something of a war hero in the aftermath of Gulf War. Speculated as the man most likely to become the first African-American president of the United States he was wooed for a while by both the Republicans and

chad over the legitimacy of the new administration President Bush cannot but be inclined to put up a spectacular show somewhere in some manner. The pomp and grandeur of the Desert Storm could be one that must be floating in the mind of new incumbent in the oval office. And the excuses are aplenty in the Israelis and Palestinians clashing, of late, rather too frequently, Hizbullah in Lebanon vowing to march to Jerusalem and of course, a

bombings during Clinton era have taken the undermining of President Saddam Hussain not one step forward, although the US-led embargo created enormous suffering for ordinary Iraqis, in particular the children.

On the contrary there are encouraging signs for Saddam Hussain of growing sanctions-busting. The seal around Iraq's border is becoming ever leakier. Smuggling is rife, so much so that

board. Even Saudi Arabia, the launch-pad for British and American aircraft flying over southern Iraq, has recently opened a border crossing.

By all appearance Iraq's siege fatigue is already over. Baghdad's long-defunct airport now daily receives friendly flights, most with the UN's permission. Many bear dignitaries keen to cash in on Iraq's soaring oil revenues. More than twenty ministers showed up at a trade fair last October. Old enemies, such as Iraq and Syria talk of resuming diplomatic ties. Half a dozen Arab countries have already done so. The last summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference attended by 56 Muslim leaders witnessed a groundswell of impatience with sanctions. Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General used the same summit to relaunch a dialogue "without pre-conditions with Iraqi leadership". Since then Mr Annan has suggested that if the sanction is not achieving its objective it should be revised to offer more incentive and less punishment.

Can these developments be put into reverse gear? There seems to be new alacrity both in the state department as well as in Pentagon to do exactly that. The celebration marking the 10th anniversary of Kuwait's liberation from Iraq both in Kuwait City and Riyadh on 26 February will be joined by Collin Powell whose role in the Gulf conflict should have led to his indictment, along side Saddam Hussain, as a war criminal of course in a less unjust world. The old Bush's Gulf War team is back in new American administration portending period of new anxiety and uncertainty in the region.

PERSPECTIVES

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OPINION

Time to ban fundamentalist parties

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN writes from New York

FUNDAMENTALISTS declare High Court judges murtads for their judgement against fatwa and in doing so sanction their killing. In the capital, armed Islamist activists are brought in by the truckload from madrasahs all over the country to agitate against secular basis of the state. A section of the agitators captures a police constable and slaughters him. This they do in a mosque and under the direction of their "spiritual" leader. In a preplanned move, they attack people calling for resistance to forces of fundamentalism. In Brahmanbaria, already a hotbed of fundamentalism and a notorious bastion of anti-liberal forces, they attack a police station and turn the town onto a battlefield. A police officer is hacked to near-death. Railway tracks are torn up, a bridge destroyed, and train services brought to a halt. In a sequel to Brahmanbaria, further violence erupts, rail tracks are sabotaged in Feni, a train crashes and deaths follow.

These are scenes from the last few days. Weeks ago, a powerful bomb went off at a gathering of the Communist Party of Bangladesh to protest, among others, the emergence of anti-liberation forces. That explosion killed 4 people and injured dozens. There is a high probability that this too was the handiwork of Islamist activists, sworn enemies of the "godless" leftists. The Home Minister, for one, thinks so.

Going further back into the past, there were many occasions when liberal intellectuals, especially secularists, were pronounced murtads by the mullahs, laying them open to real threats of murder. There was an attempt on the life of poet Shamsur Rahman. In more recent time there was what appeared to be an elaborate plot to kill the Prime Minister of the country at Kotlailpara where she was to address a public gathering. A rabid fundamentalist group is said to be responsible for both attempts. The alleged mastermind behind the Kotlailpara plot is still in hiding.

This is by no means a series of isolated incidents. It is clear that over the past

few years Islamic fundamentalists have gathered strength at an unprecedented scale. According to press reports, Islamic militants have been trained in numbers, which, if correct, should boggle any sane mind. A new type of madrasahs has sprouted all over the country and these are not only centres for indoctrination in extremist ideologies but are also reported to be training grounds for armed cadres of all shades. Not all madrasahs fall into this category, but many undoubtedly do. The sources of finance of these institutions must be cause for worry. We have heard slogans calling for establishment of Taliban type of government in the country. There are madrasahs that flaunt the name Taliban.

The circumstances leading to this state of affairs are complex and deserve a long and hard look. There have been huge lapses in government policy here and the intelligentsia of the country must share a large part of the blame. These must be thoroughly examined. But some immediate steps must also be taken. These should include a ban on all political activities designed to further religious ends. Just condemning the use of religion in politics, as has become the wont of the government and some political parties in the aftermath of the recent events, is plainly not enough. It is also quite unnecessary, even bizarre, for the Government to bend over backwards to explain the current situation in the country to Islamic governments abroad. What is needed is firm action and not further pronouncements to placate. The national parliament is in session. It should act now. In doing so it should be guided by the founding principles of the state of Bangladesh.

Under normal circumstances, restricting political freedom should certainly be unwelcome. But these are not normal times. Desperate situation calls for desperate solutions, particularly when that situation has been created by forces which are wholly undemocratic. More to the point, a ban on political activities based on fundamentalist ideologies would leave the freedom of the individual to practice the faith of his choice entirely unfettered.

The heart of the battle

ESAM SOHAIL writes from Kansas

SOME weeks ago I wrote about the continuing battle between religious fanaticism and progress in Bangladesh and, for that matter, in much of the Islamic world. The battle goes on as is evident by the recent rally of the Islamist parties in which they declared war on the civil society movement. As an offshoot of the rally, several people were killed in the ensuing mob violence including a policeman whose sole crime seems to have been a dedication to duty in the most hazardous circumstances.

In the noise generated by rallies, High Court verdicts, and hartals, a more fundamental issue is obscured. At the core of this tug of war between secularists and Islamists is a basic question: what should be the role of religion in public life? The framers of the republic's maiden constitution had provided an indication, if not a conclusive answer, by enshrining secularism as a pillar of nationhood. That pillar was modified, though certainly not abolished, by the Fifth Amendment that required the state to place 'absolute trust in Almighty Allah'. But the battle for the soul of our republic continues.

Our elite have been sadly deficient in conducting a robust defence of the principle of secularism. The simple idea that religion is a highly sanctified personal matter between a man and his Creator has been lost in the war of words. Writing over two hundred years ago America's premier philosopher-president put it succinctly when he declared that "...in the holy communion between man and God there is space enough for only two entities, namely man and God." Thomas Jefferson went on to argue that by its nature true religion left no place for a society's majority, its clergy, or its government to interfere in man's relationship with his Maker. Lest the Islamists think that these were only the thoughts of a foreign, far-away man, one would invite them to reflect on the words of none other than the progenitor of the Two Nation theory, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. He had the following hopes for his new country when he spoke to Pakistan's first Constituent Assembly in September 1947.

"...a Pakistan where a Hindu will cease to be a Hindu and Muslim will cease to be a Muslim...not in the religious sense but in relation to the State, for your religion is no business of the State..."

At the very mention of these words, the defenders of Islamist politics jump to say that Islam is a tolerant religion which allows everybody to practise his faith freely etc etc. That is precisely the point. We cannot become a society that merely 'allows' or 'tolerates' people's religions or politics. It is not society's prerogative or a government's bounty to give. The right to freely exercise or refuse to exercise any religion and switch between many different modes of worship is a right that is written on the heart of each man by the Holy Hand of God Himself. As such, this right is neither the government's to give nor say, the Jamaat's or IO's to take back. An adult has an unfettered and absolute right to go to a mosque or not and nobody, parents, society, ministers, and maulanas included, has any rightful say in that matter. It is when we slide away from this basic premise of secularism that the so-called fundamentalists get emboldened to mount a frontal attack on the institutions of progress.

If I argue that everybody has the right to live according to the tenets of his religion, should it not necessarily follow that pious Muslims ought to be able to live their lives according to the injunctions of their faith? After all, as my parents often argue, Islam is a complete code of life with teachings on politics, economics, society and what not!

The answer is yes. If anybody wants to live his life according to the teachings of his faith, nobody ought to interfere with that choice. The problem arises, however, when some of us claim that others too ought to live according to our religious principles. This arrogance, couched in religious humility, comes out of a belief that one religion is better than the others are and, therefore, should be given preferential treatment. That kind of warped logic has resulted in electoral apartheid in Pakistan, beheadings of converts in Iran, and a prohibition of non-Muslim worship in Saudi Arabia. While Bangladesh has not by far reached those depths of depravity, the thunderous threats against

High Court judges, NGOs, and secular writers is evidence that such dangerous thinking pervades many a Bengali mind too.

The fact of the matter is that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God and they should be so in the eyes of their neighbours and their governments too. No religion, no matter how elaborate its teachings or how noble its heritage, can be considered better than other faith traditions because that judgement is the prerogative of the Creator not His self-proclaimed lieutenants. It is more than mere liberal simplicity to say that there are as many paths to God as there are people. In fact it is the right thing to believe, say, and articulate. Just as the concept of racism is inhuman and worthy of universal condemnation, so is the bigotry that is based on religious differences.

Governments and courts can do only this much. The real change of attitude will come with a change of heart. Here is where our educated men and women can take the lead. They have a right, nay, a duty, to articulate the ideas that challenge the bigotry espoused by those who would turn this Republic into a rogue theocracy. This battle for the republic's soul may be fought in the streets and the courts, but it will be won or lost in the hearts of average Bengalis. It is up to the country's elite to provide the next generation with the hope that someday a citizen will be judged not by the conduct of his worship but by the content of his character.

Religion is a sanctified and noble part of one's essence. It need not be sullied by dragging it from the elevated confines of one's heart into the depraved rumblings of the public square. Contrary to the poison spewed by the petty merchants of obstinacy, God needs no protection from the various gentlemen that have outlandish titles attached to their names. In fact, these venerable men may need God's help, like all of us do, to get eternal salvation. But there must not be any interference. In the powerful words of the Holy Qur'an,

"Lakum deenu kum walia deen"
(To them their religion, to me mine.)

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Call off hartal

In spite of the request by the leader of the opposition to call off Monday's hartal in view of pilgrims going for Hajj, the opposition has decided to continue with the programme. I understand they want to show a severe form of protest against the government but why at the cost of religion? Why are they putting these pilgrims through extra hardship when they are already heading for a long, exhausting journey (I know, because I have performed Hajj once). Even the Jamaat-e-Islami decided to support the hartal. All I want to say to them is call off the hartal on Monday and let the pilgrims travel in comfort.

A student
Dhaka

Workers' plight

I am amazed at the Bangladesh government's inability to deal with a simple problem like cleaning up the recruitment agencies that send workers overseas. Four agents have been implicated in doing serious harm to workers in Saudi Arabia but they have still not been closed down. What is the reason? Are vested interests protecting these firms?

The ban on workers to Malaysia is obviously because the agents have been indulging in underhand

deals. Workers are at the mercy of agents. They are poor people, trying desperately to find a new life for themselves and their families. How can the government turn a blind eye to their plight?

Sheila Karim
Toronto, Canada

Tipu vs Hazari

What has been done to the UNB journalist Tipu allegedly by MP Zainul Abedeen Hazari would not have been inflicted on animals even if one wanted to quench the deepest rage! Hazari and his men have antagonised the masses in such a way that the day is not very far off when they will be held accountable.

Mujibur Haque
Sobhanbag, Dhaka

Doctor's ethics?

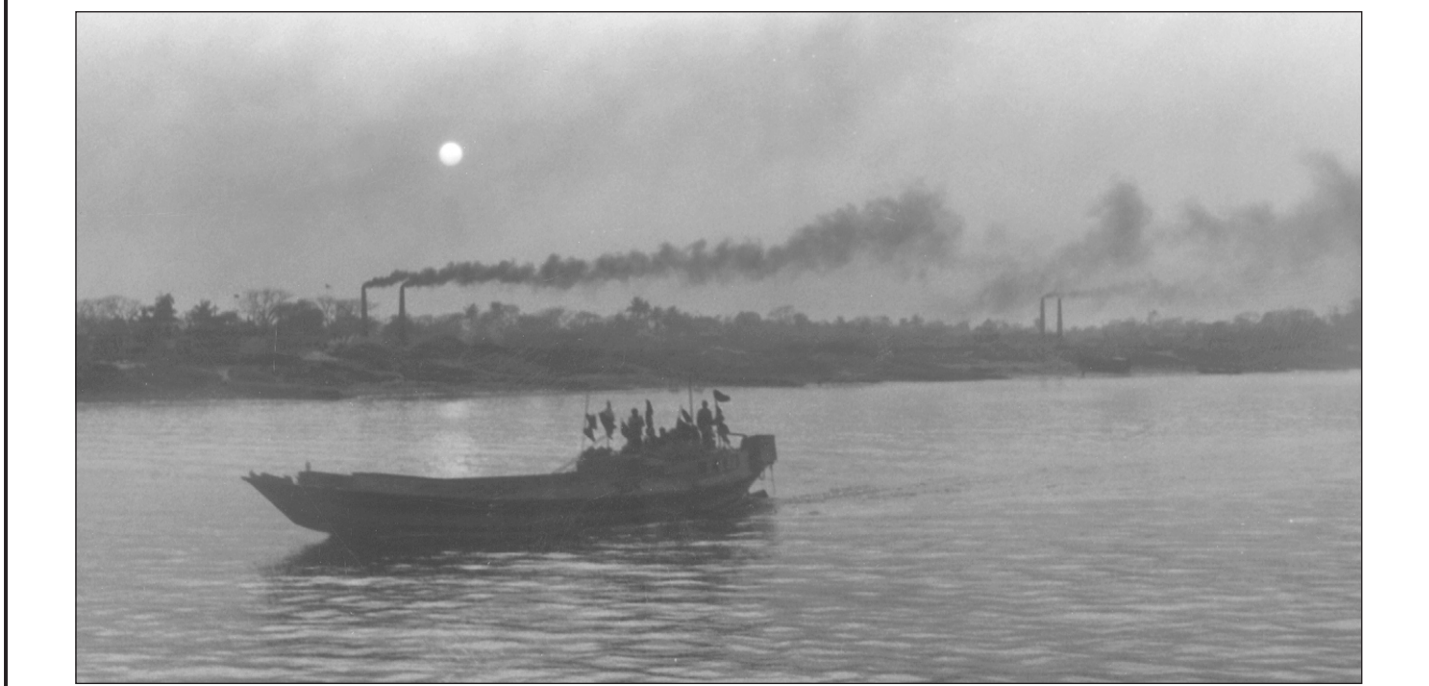
The role of Dr HBM Iqbal, MP of the ruling party in the procession that allegedly opened fire and killed several people in the opposition alliance demonstration on February 13 is shameful. A doctor's duty is to save lives. This MP's actions have gone against the ethics of a physician. It is a shame for the nation.

Shamsar
Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

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.

Wanted: clean air!



STAR PHOTO: A K M MOHSIN

An idyllic scene on the River Buriganga is marred by the columns of black smoke emitted by brick factories. As a result of indiscriminate and uncontrolled expansion of brick kilns, the air is so polluted in some areas that old people and infants are complaining of chronic breathing problems. What is the Ministry of Environment doing? We have said this before and we say it again. We must have clean air to breathe.

Run-up to elections

Although we have had a parliamentary form of democracy for the last 10 years, and a proud history of uprooting autocracy, we have still not developed a real democratic culture. We have to be very careful in the future elections to protect national interests at any cost. The two major parties plus others should arrive at a consensus that any denial of hard facts regarding national interests will lead to serious disasters as well as risk inviting another autocratic force.

The birth and rapid expansion of terrorism could be the main obstacle in the forthcoming elections. One is apprehensive whether the caretaker government will be competent enough to protect against it. Here are some suggestions for the caretaker government to: 1) Reshuffle administrative cadres and involve district and thana judicials instead of DC and TNOs with the help of the Election Commission; 2) Use the Army/BDR instead of police; 3) Cancel the Jono-Nirapotta Law by special powers of President because this is a major demand by the opponent political parties; 4) Carefully maintain a neutral attitude towards all political parties in combating their cadres and anarchists;

4) Invite international observers; 5) Cancel nominations of all loan defaulters, tax defaulters, defaulter of telephone bills amongst the present elected MPs; 6) Announce the results after elections have been completed in all the centres because results influence the rest of the elections.

A national debate, with the help of the mass media should be launched. We want to be among the top ten nations of the world and to achieve this we need democracy at any cost. We need to have patience. Even if a party feels that some little injustice has been done to it, the leader should have utmost patience in the interest of the nation, like the recent elections in America where though Gore had won he showed maximum tolerance in the interest of his nation. It is important that the elections are free and fair, not which party has won in the final run. The two leaders could start a dialogue regarding free and fair elections and come to a consensus regarding many national issues. This would be quite possible if they were sincere enough.

Shamsur Rahman Chowdhury
Sylhet