

Pahela Baishakh blast

Find out the culprits

Emotions have run riot and continue to do so, even now. The dastardly act that threw a dark cloud over Pahela Baishakh cannot but evoke sadness, shock, the deepest revulsion and outrage. In the aftermath of the bomb blast at Ramna Park that killed nine and injured many more, the entire nation has reeled from the sheer horror of the incident. The abomination would be reprehensible enough at any time, but it is doubled in impact because it was perpetrated on a day that exudes, with every musical note and wondrous ritual of pleasure, the deep joy and elation of ushering in the Bengali New Year. Like the nation, we, too, condemn the incident, express deep sadness at the senseless loss of life and are revolted by the malicious intent inherent in this crime.

It is disappointing that the government, including the Prime Minister herself, has been quick to indulge in political rhetoric, pointing a finger at certain 'suspected' quarters, on the grounds of their well-known affiliations. We urge the government to abandon any attempt to make political capital from an event of such heinous proportions that begs serious and undistracted investigation to get to the bottom of it. Those who master-minded it will have to be ferreted out if the government is to restore its lost credibility in such matters.

Mere actions of detaining suspects are not enough. These must be followed up with a thorough process of conviction and punishment that would deter others from following in this path.

Two similar tragedies, the Udichi blast three years ago, and the blast at the CPB rally earlier this year, have remained mysteriously unsolved till now. In the present case, how did the perpetrators manage to elude the high level of vigilance that the authorities claimed was in place since a day before the incident? And how would an ordinary person feel secure or confident when going to any public event in the future?

The emotional trauma suffered by the people as a whole must take time to heal but it would be only mitigated if there were clear and open signs of redress, accountability, transparency, conviction and deterrence.

Corruption losses staggering

Figures put together by TIB

The Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) plumbing deeper into incidents of corruption covered in 21 national and local dailies during July-December, 2000 has found law enforcers and high government officials among the most corrupt in the country. Sector-wise portrayal shows law enforcement topping the list followed by education, local government and health as political parties, judiciary and defence ranked lower down the order. Since the TIB study is based on a news-scan confined to the second half of last year it does present a limited picture of things. But its analysis of the trend pretty much confirms both the general public impression about the malady as well as that which the World Bank, ADB or Amnesty International have brought up periodically as economic or governance issues. Nevertheless, the fact remains that if all the incidents of corruption had seen daylight on being reported by newspapers, there would have been an infinitely more horrendous realisation about corruption: the extent to which economic losses are inflicted on the nation together with an infringement on civic rights, because corruption and abuse of power go hand in hand.

The TIB study points to the staggering loss of Tk 5657 crore wrought by corruption during the six months of last year under review. A World Bank analysis had earlier suggested how our GDP growth could have been markedly higher, by 2 per cent at least, if corruption could be contained at a level some countries on a better growth track have done.

Let's have the political will needed to carry out police reform, sweep away the regulatory cobwebs and introduce transparency based on accountability at all levels of decision-making.

Shuva nobo borsho, or is it?



DR. A. R. CHOUDHURY

WHAT a way to greet a new year! This senseless killing of innocent concert goers at Ramna has left the nation numb. Dozens of people have either been killed or critically injured. Many more families are left shattered. But why? What can we say to these bereaved families except that the nation mourns their loss? The killings are particularly shocking, perhaps because of the barbaric fashion of the act and because the atrocities occurred at a concert that has become a hallmark for the Bengali new year's celebration in Dhaka.

Unconfirmed initial reports point fingers toward a right-wing conspiracy. The blame for the killing of innocent civilians rests squarely on the shoulders of those who committed the crime. Such terrorism can be at least partly explained and understood, but it can never be justified. It is the work of the morally bankrupt.

The defining feature and the most revolting aspect of terrorism is that it deliberately targets innocent people, not those who are able to defend themselves. The revulsion that terrorism creates is intended. It seeks both to astonish and frighten people. In that single, repellent sense, the terrorists who

killed these innocent people by detonating explosives at Ramna were successful. The incident at Ramna is not an isolated event. Recent killings of Kazi Aref and his associates, bombing of the Udichi function and Communist Party rally, show an alarming pattern that would leave any rational individual concerned about the direction the country is moving towards. These acts, both individually as well as collectively, undermine civil society, political system and the coun-

try's sovereignty by normalising violence and graft and introducing a corrupt cancer into the political structure. There appears to be a concerted effort to destabilise the transition to democracy. Whoever is involved in unleashing these violent terrorist activities on innocent people should be brought to justice. The ruling party has a dual role. On one hand, it should take decisive actions against those involved in these activities. On the other hand, it should also prevent its own supporters from participating in similar acts of violence.

It is unfortunate but true that no major political party is immune from the criticism of using armed cadres to suppress their opponents. Awami League has done it. BNP has not been far behind. Who can forget Jatiya Party's activities

during its heyday? And Jamaat-Islam is infamous for its armed cadres. Extremists, on both the right and left of the political spectrum, have a long history of annihilating those with whom they differ on political issues. The fight against terrorism is difficult under any circumstances, particularly in areas where terrorists can run and hide. It doesn't help either when, supplying virtually no evidence, political parties exploit the killings for political purposes.

radical improvement in the Awami League government's measures to combat terrorism lies in its consistency and courage in maintaining a firm and effective policy against terrorism in all its forms. They must abhor the idea that terrorism can be tolerated as long as it is only affecting someone else's democratic rights. They must adopt the clear principle that one party's terrorist is also another party's terrorist. The actions by the government

assumed that he has a freer hand in weeding out terrorists from different parties. His public statements are quite assuring. In the past, he has been quoted as saying, "I will not compromise on the question of curbing terrorism. Stern action will be taken against any terrorist whichever party he may belong to" (DS, March 15, 2000). We can only expect his deeds to match his words. The leaders of BNP also have their work cut out. Instead of directing all their energies towards

all major political parties have armed cadres of their own. The sooner the leaders realise the follies of this policy, the easier it would be to eradicate terrorism from our lives. It is important to realise that terrorist activity doesn't take place in a vacuum. Rather, increases or decreases in terrorism are the results of an interaction between terrorist activities and counter-terrorist initiatives. The two are inherently linked. Hence there is a need for well-thought out policy responses to a terrorist threat and to warn of the danger of overreaction. In other words, a simplistic approach will only further serve the terrorist groups with political opportunities and support from the intimidated local population. The government will have to walk a fine line.

Tactical measures, without the willingness to look at the political situation and the roots of the violence, are doomed to be ineffective in the long run. The government that falls into this pitfall loses its normal ground. If the campaign against terrorism is to succeed, cooperation among different political parties will have to be initiated, and the momentum generated by various socio-cultural organisations and public outcry that will be demonstrated in the news media in the next few days will have to be sustained. Instead of finger-pointing, all forces believing in a peaceful, democratic process should join hands in combating terrorism.

Let the barbaric killings at Ramna open our eyes once and for all. Remember, today's victims may have been someone else's children. But tomorrow, it might be yours. Destroy the terrorists before they destroy the nation!

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Instead of finger-pointing, all forces believing in a peaceful, democratic process should join hands in combating terrorism. Let the barbaric killings at Ramna open our eyes once and for all. Remember, today's victims may have been someone else's children. But tomorrow, it might be yours. Destroy the terrorists before they destroy the nation!

Domestic terrorism by disenfranchised individuals and groups is sometimes difficult to prevent due to the less predictable nature of this type of threat. A number of contentious issues which elude consensus can attract few people who would move their political agenda through conflict. Inspired by extremist beliefs, or by real and imaginary grievances, they resort to random unconstrained violence.

Decentralised decision-making by the terrorists adds to their unpredictability. Leaders of various political parties establish the broad directions of the movement, and decisions on what actions to take rest with individuals or small cells. Trouble mongers can take advantage of this situation by advancing their own agenda.

Faced with this scenario of terrorism, the prospect of achieving

in combating terrorism in general, and the terrorist attack at Ramna in particular, must include the following. First, they must show an absolute determination to defeat terrorism within the framework of the rule of law and the democratic process. Second, no deals and concessions should be made even in the face of the most severe intimidation and blackmail. Third, an intensified effort needs to be made in order to bring the terrorists, irrespective of their party affiliation, to justice by prosecution and conviction before the court of law. And finally, tough legislative measures should be introduced to penalize sponsors who provide terrorists with safe haven, explosives, cash, and moral support.

Given Home Minister Mohammad Nasim's closeness to the party hierarchy, it can be

the Awami League, they should also create an atmosphere where violent anti-social elements feel unwelcome in their party. If the initial reports are true, and right wing fascist elements are behind the Ramna massacre, BNP has to take the responsibility to make sure that these elements are in no way part of their four-party alliance. Simply shrugging shoulders and washing away responsibilities may not be enough this time. Positive steps by the two major parties would help to isolate those who are on the fringe. During every prior incidence of political violence, leaders of the major parties have tried to portray a holier-than-thou role. They would have us believe that violence is always instigated and perpetrated by the supporters of the opposing party. Nothing can be further from truth! It is a fact that

the spot for money or other goods. Transactions that involve distance or time are not self-enforcing. Where trust is rare, a promise to pay next week for goods received this week is a risky contract for the seller. If such contracts cannot be made with confidence, the corresponding market may not exist at all. In illiberal democracies contract rights and property rights are

Illiberal democracy and economic development

M G QUIBRIA

IN the developing world, surges of economic prosperity have not come on the heels of the recent rising tide of democracy. Economic growth remains weak and poverty is on the rise. The new wind of political freedom could not provide the much-needed shot in the arm in economy, whose vitality had often been drained off by the plundering tin-pot dictators that preceded. Indeed, in many parts of the world, democracy had been accompanied by political and social chaos. One wonders whatever happened to the economic and social dividend of those expectations of higher growth and greater social harmony that democracy was to bring in its wake.

Democracy provides political liberties. It gives citizens the right to select governments through elections. But these elections do not mean that they are free and fair nor that the leaders they elect are the right kind. In many poor countries, elections have thrown up terrible leaders, thoroughly unprepared to take up the enormous challenge of economic and social development. Some are bratty children of populist leaders, some are petulant housewives without much training in the

sophistry of modern governance. And some are rough and tough village chieftains, the democratic cousins of the deposed autocrats, determined to play fast and loose with citizens' basic rights and freedoms. This phenomenon of unenlightened leadership has taken on an epidemic proportion in developing countries.

Unenlightened leaders beget

rule of law and tread on the basic liberties of citizens. They deprive citizens' freedom of speech, particularly those views that are opposed to them. They would, whenever they could, snatch others' properties, much like what economist Mancur Olson called the behaviour of "roving bandits". These bandits, as Olson would put it, don't have an "encompassing

economic inquiries into question of economic growth of nations by economist Robert Barro and others have shown that this set of economic liberties do have a fundamental influence on development. The recent history of East Asian miracle economies also attests to this fact. While these countries were largely autocratic

do not enjoy people's support and flirtations with theocratic politics: none of these would certainly augur well for liberal well for liberal democracy.

Illiberal democracies breed social and political tensions and create serious dysfunctional societies. Such dysfunctional societies, as the recent history of the developing world suggests, are poor hosts to economic growth and social progress. This is nowhere more evident than parts of Africa where societies have been rendered largely dysfunctional by the lethal combination of illiberal democracy and interethnic ethnic rivalries.

Illiberal democracies breed social and political tensions and create serious dysfunctional societies... The present leadership in Bangladesh has a historical responsibility to steer the system toward a liberal democracy that accords the citizens full political, economic, civil, and religious rights. If it succeeds, then the dream of a modern, prosperous Bangladesh would gradually become a reality.

illiberal democracies. Illiberal democracies do not enshrine the rule of law, the separation of powers and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property. This bundle of freedoms, which has been variously called as civil liberties or constitutional liberalism, has been inextricably intertwined with the western political fabric. While democracy is prospering in the development countries, these liberties are not. In the illiberal democracies, the unenlightened leaders routinely transgress the constitutional boundaries of their powers, show little respect for the

interest" in the prosperity of their citizens they are robbing, despite the putative threat of elections. When it comes to behaviour, illiberal democrats and illiberal autocrats are much the same, with the similar disastrous impact on economic development.

Why are illiberal democracies so particularly dreadful for economic development? Because they fail to provide some of the basic ingredients of economic prosperity. These basic ingredients include such civil liberties as rule of law, property rights and enforcement of contracts, without which it is difficult to conduct

and even ruthless in many respects, they accorded the citizens a wide berth of economic and civil rights. As a result, when it comes to economic development, even autocracies that were liberal had performed far superior to illiberal democracies.

Economist Mancur Olson has a simple but subtle explanation. According to this explanation, the crucial difference between development and developing countries lies not in markets that exist, but in markets that do not exist. In the poorest countries markets generally conduct "self-enforcing transactions," with goods exchanged on

poorly defined or weakly enforced. Such rights are necessary for advanced markets, which in turn are essential for rapid growth.

The recent history shows few illiberal democracies graduating to liberal democracies, but many are drifting toward torrid illiberalism. Some recent newspaper items from Bangladesh make one wonder whether the country is drifting toward the wrong direction. Flagrant and frequent violations of rule of law, regular encroachment of the separation of powers, rampant political violence, intolerance toward other viewpoints, incessant harlots that

The present leadership in Bangladesh has a historical responsibility to steer the system toward a liberal democracy that accords the citizens full political, economic, civil, and religious rights. If it succeeds, then the dream of a modern, prosperous Bangladesh would gradually become a reality. However, if the leadership lurches and continues to engage in destructive illiberal politics, the past of Africa may become the future of Bangladesh!

M G Quibria is Senior Advisor to Asian Development Institute in Tokyo.

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

Pahela Baishakh bombing

The bomb incident at Ramna Batamal on the eve of Bengali New Year is inhuman and barbaric. What is going on in the country? Doesn't rule of law prevail here? What is the government planning to do about this incident? Will this incident be forgotten like that of the Udichi incident and other such incidents? Will the matter and bring the criminals to book? Can't we at least expect a sincere effort from the government?

Baishakhi Saha
Dhaka

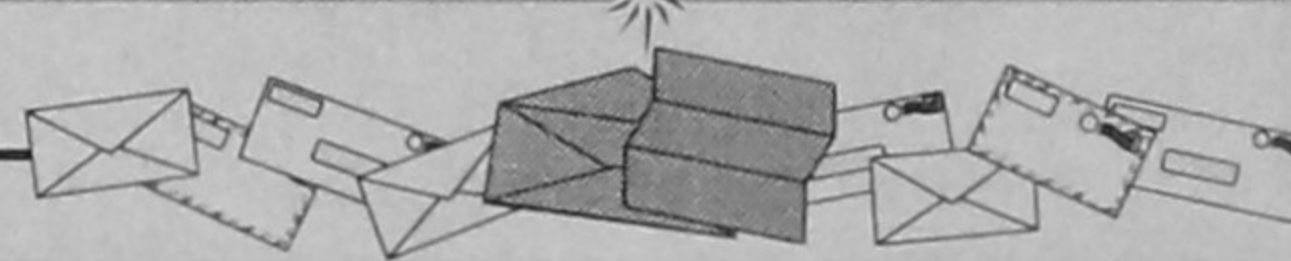
I was totally taken aback after reading about the bomb blast at the Bangla New Year celebrations in Dhaka. What have we become? Have we turned into animals? Such incidents are going to rip apart the country and its people into factions, more so, when the Prime Minister doesn't waste time to put blame on the usual suspects, without bothering to calm the tense and tragic situation.

I remember the day when Timothy McVeigh blew up the U.S Federal Building in Oklahoma City. I feared that the Americans would jump to conclusion and blame the Muslims. But I remember with much respect the way President Bill Clinton handled the situation by requesting his fellow Americans not to blame anybody or any particular group until a full investigation is completed and the guilty party is found. Why can't our leaders be the leaders who unite, not divide and be the figure of calmness in the midst of chaos and mayhem?

Anwar Babar
Dallas, Texas, USA

I have no words to condemn the bombing incident at Ramna Batamal on the first day of Baishakh. This is absolutely inhuman. We demand that the criminals are brought to book without any delay. We should hire reputed agencies like FBI and Scotland Yard to investigate the incident. We should take all necessary steps to unveil the criminals. The nation owes it to itself.

Avery concern citizen
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.

Biting bane



STAR PHOTO: AKIM MOHSIN

Two tiny tots take a bite of ice-cream for respite in the scorching heat. Little do they care about the harmful consequences it may bring about, as long as it is cheap and available. Maybe, that is why stomach ailments, jaundice, hepatitis, etc are prevalent in summer, especially among the poor and the marginalised. Quality control and monitoring of food items, it seems, do not apply for the downtrodden, do they?

I am going back

I might sound unrealistic, but the only response I have to Naushin's ("We want to come back" April 14) plea is that instead of waiting for some miracle to happen, let's go back to our motherland and work for its salvation. With the passing of time, the educated middle-class has alienated itself from common interest, and focused more on self-gain. This musing with "myself", we observe now a days all over the world, is actually the root of all evils and Bangladesh is no exception. We blame one another for everything without taking any responsibility. The petty "I" always reigns supreme. Deep in our heart, does any of us believe that if we dare to leave our luxurious home in a foreign land where we live like second grade citizens for the sorrowful abode called Bangladesh, we are going to be repudiated? Our country needs us as agents of change. It is up to us to initiate the change.

Ahmed Tazmeen
Illinois State University, USA

Corrupt politics

The opposition political party will

carry out their agitation programme till the ruling party steps down. The ruling party, on the other hand, won't let go off the power. In between there is much mud-slinging and washing dirty linens in public. Not to forget the bomb hurling, killings, car breaking, extortion, damaging of public property and the much hated hartals.

In this supposedly democratic country where does public fit? What about those who don't have a fixed income? What about the school goers who are giving up their holidays for making up the lost instructional time? What about the rickshawwallas and thelagariwallas, some of whom were killed while trying to earn some money during hartal hours? What about those not-so-rich people who have borrowed money from the bank? Will their bank interest be reduced because of hartals? What about all those people out there, who are hostages in the hands of the politicians?

It is about time we started fighting against this dirty politics.

Leapie
Dhaka