

## Neutralising use of arms in election

Political parties need to extend helping hand

**W**EAPONS are trouble, legal or illegal. In Bangladesh's context, it is more so just before, during and immediately after the election, be it local or national. So, when the caretaker government had singled out confiscation of illegal arms as its topmost priority towards helping the Election Commission conduct a peaceful, free and fair general election, we felt assured. Still, in the back of our minds, there was the fear that it would not be possible to round up all illegal arms, estimated to be somewhere above 250,000, in such a short period of time at the disposal of the present government. Our apprehension has come true. Although weapons and explosives confiscated so far in the ongoing special drive (more than five thousand and over 180,000 respectively) far outnumber the exploits of similar countrywide combing operations undertaken before the 1991 and 1996 elections, they are minuscule before the suspected numbers in existence. The most realistic inference which can be drawn at this point in time is that more than 200,000 illegal weapons might be out in the open when the nation goes to polls 11 days later. Then there are more than five thousand licensed weapons, a bulk of which, according to reports in the media, are in the possession of leaders and activists of the Awami League and its front organisations.

A bleak scenario indeed. There are a few positives, nevertheless. The confiscation rate of the special police drive may be modest; but it has been successful nonetheless to send the terrorists underground with their caches of illegal arms. There remains the possibility of their re-emergence just before the election though; however, their effectiveness would stand largely nullified by the countrywide deployment of armed forces on election duty. As for the licensed weapons, the council of advisors on Monday decided that all authorised pistols and revolvers would have to be deposited with the police stations a week ahead of the election date. Besides, no licensed single or double-barrel guns would be allowed in public.

Still, whether the election would be marred by violence and bloodletting is a matter that critically hinges on how the political parties tend to behave, especially the major two, namely the AL and the BNP. So far neither of the two has made any effort to rein in their trouble-mongering cadres and activists. The news of more than 100 deaths and grievous injury to hundreds of others perpetrated in countrywide political violence bears testimony to this effect. If we are expecting the caretaker government to cast a magic spell and pull off a peaceful election all by itself, we would certainly be wrong. That's why the caretaker government has never tired of seeking cooperation from the political parties.

## Bangladesh acts to prevent ozone depletion

But when will the world act on global warming?

**T**HE Government of Bangladesh has announced that it will cut the consumption of the harmful ozone gas emitting products as per international accords. The ozone layer protects harmful radiation from the sun to reach earth and its inhabitants, which can cause many hazards including a high incidence of cancer, especially skin cancer. The developed world is particularly threatened by this depletion of the layer and international accords exist to protect the layer. Bangladesh has signed them and is doing its bit.

This depletion is being caused among other reasons by overuse of certain type of consumer products including coolants used in air-conditioners, fridges etc. Other agents are also responsible. But the developed world, especially the United States while focussing on ozone depletion has ignored the dangers posed by global warming. Bangladesh will be one of the worst affected places in the world and the threat of almost one third of it being drowned is a real one. Yet even the simplest international protocols like the Rio and Kyoto agreements are being ignored. In effect it means following an aggressive policy of limitless consumption to suit a lifestyle which results in a high degree of carbon emission. This is changing the world's climate dramatically for the worse. It practically is a death sentence on Bangladesh and other low lying or impoverished countries.

It is a strange paradox that while Bangladesh though it has little contribution to the depletion of ozone layer follows international agreements she can't make the United States and other developing countries agree to lessen minute bits of carbon emission. Loss of cultivable land, massive epidemics, intense cyclones, sea level rise forcing millions to become refugees are only few of the many disasters just waiting to happen. It's a nightmare beyond description staring us in the face with no sanctuary in sight.

One applauds the Bangladesh government for its adherence to such treaties. It's a sign of being part of the comity of nations. But can't the Bangladesh government at least raise its voice in protest and not mew in agreement every time as it is being washed away.

## 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.

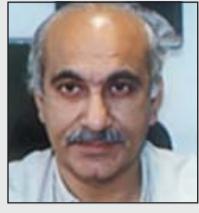


### How strong is democratic institution?

Enthusiasts are on their way to 'campaigning' for their respective party or candidate. In the countryside the monsoon water has not receded yet, the path is still muddy, but nothing can deter their zeal. They are strong in will. Fine. But whom they ask the voters to cast their votes for? How democratic and 'dependable' the person is? How strong the democratic institution itself be under him/her? These are questions

STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

## The rebirth of history



M.J. AKBAR

place in a small town in the north of Afghanistan, Faizabad? Two "journalists", Moroccans with Belgian passports named Karim and Kassam, travelled from London to Pakistan and from there to Kabul. In the capital of Afghanistan they met Taliban officials on the pretext of working on a story. On 9 September these "journalists" met, by appointment for an interview, Ahmad Shah Masood, leader of the Northern Alliance against Kabul, a war hero many times over, and the only

Soviets in Afghanistan. In the process Osama bin Laden found his conviction, but he did not lose his memory.

It is axiomatic that those who planned the invasion of the United States were aware of the fury of the American response. They were probably goading this response, in any case, in their search for an apocalypse. If Osama bin Laden was the mastermind, then he knew that he would be emotional target and Kabul the political destination.

soldiers need a commander to lead, a target to achieve, and a treasurer to keep them well-fed. The moment that Masood, the lion of Panjsher, had been waiting for ever since he lost to the Taliban would have arrived.

The elimination of Ahmad Shah Masood was not an accident.

One thought must have already entered the mind of President George Bush Jr as he follows almost precisely in the footsteps of his father, the last American Presi-

provided Afghanistan years of stability before Moscow's meddling with the civilian governments under the king destroyed stability for more generations than it had lasted.

Afghanistan understands war. Geography has made it history's battleground. It has seen war all through recorded history, from Alexander to Chingiz Khan (who reached the banks of the Indus and then retreated before the Indian heat) to Nadir Shah and the endless armies that marched and looted and

died in 1124 he had created a cult called the Ashishin (from which we get the word assassin) that chose as its target not just the infidel but all the Muslim princes that it placed in the category of betrayers, of near apostates who had weakened Islam by weakening their observance of the tenets of Islam. For the last 35 years of his life Hassan lived in the mountain castle of Alamut, an inaccessible stronghold from where this abstemious ascetic spread terror across the Muslim world. His followers penetrated every court, waiting for his signal for suicide missions in which they assassinated their targets (Masood, in that sense, was genuinely assassinated). Their terror lasted for far upward of a century; and in the end they were finally destroyed by Muslim states determined to quench their fanatic fervour. It was not just kings and princes who turned against them. As the scholar Dr Rafiq Zakaria confirmed to this columnist, one of the greatest theologians in Islamic history, Imam Ghazali warned Muslims that if they did not stop this sect the terrorists would hurt Islam immeasurably. This was not the spirit of Islam.

The challenge before America is to separate the Taliban movement from the broad sweep of the Muslim world; the two are neither the same nor interchangeable. The contradictions will be difficult to manage in the confusion of conflict; Pakistan's generals, for instance, could pay a price for accepting every American demand. But war has a logic that is not always logical. Perhaps generals will understand this better than others.

The unspoken danger is that Pakistan will become embroiled as heavily in this conflict as it was in the last Afghan war, also conducted with the help of Pakistani generals, then under Zia ul Haq. But General Zia was a fortunate man; the whole of Pakistan was united in the effort. General Pervez Musharraf could consider himself lucky if half his country is behind his support for the United States.

If you get up from the table alive in this poker game, you've won.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of The Daily Star

## BYLINE

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commander who prevented the Taliban from controlling the whole of Afghanistan. The two fake journalists carried bombs, either hidden in a camera or strapped to the body. They blew themselves up, and Masood died later from shrapnel wounds. It was the first of the suicide missions that would shake the world. How does Faizabad connect with New York, Washington, Boston, Pittsburgh, Florida and perhaps a few place-names we have yet to learn about?

The most remarkable aspect of this operation was the superb planning. Analysts will long debate and study what this multi-city, year-long operation revealed and what it exposed of America's government, its private and public institutions, free-and-fluide society, and of course mindspace. But there is no doubt that those who thought this out, thought it through very thoroughly. This operation was planned by someone who understood America, who knew how it worked, who knew where it was porous. It was done by someone who had lived for some years in the United States, and had probably worked with its administration at some level. Someone who knew the psychological impact of a strike on symbols as powerful as the First Home of politics, the First Home of the military, and the First Home of finance. Someone with the biodata of Osama bin Laden, who once spent his father's money on high society hangouts and, when a sudden opportunity arose, worked with the CIA to fill an empty life with the adventure of a war against the

America would declare war. What would be the nature of this assault? Americans would of course use their aircraft carriers in the Indian Ocean, for which they needed no one's permission. The south was in that sense secure, and undefended by Kabul. India would obviously help in any way it could, but geopolitics imposed limitations on what India could do for the war effort. Pakistan was easy to read. Its government did not have the strength to stand up to any American wish list. American air power would operate from Pakistan and perhaps India as well. But ground troops as an assault force through the Pakistan-Afghanistan border were another matter. Pakistan was not a country where the government was in full control. There would be popular sentiment against an American presence; worse, there was the potential for sabotage by the innumerable, armed jihadis spawned for reasons stretching from Moscow to Kashmir. The most effective land assault could only be from the north, through that small gap outside the control of the Taliban near Tajikistan. Russia, embittered by Chechnya, would be a ready ally, but with reservations about sending its own troops. Americans would be reluctant as well to involve its troops; and if forced to do so, would minimise the body-exposure. Washington would always prefer to use the men under Masood, re-arming them with the best weaponry, and filling out ranks with well-paid recruits from the Tajiks or any tribes that were willing to cooperate for any reason in the drive towards Kabul. But all

dent to take his country to war (the attack on Yugoslavia during President Clinton's term was a blip rather than a battle). That thought is not about who is the enemy. Henry Kissinger, the ranking Republican intellectual, has outlined both the enemy and the methodology of the response: "Any government that shelters groups capable of this kind of attack, whether or not they can be shown to have been involved in this attack, must pay an exorbitant price." That is 29 words meaning Afghanistan. The method? "It is something to do calmly, carefully and inexorably."

The question in Bush's mind must surely be not about when to start the war, but when to stop. His father paid a heavy price because he did not know the answer to the second question; he confused the start with victory, with the result that Saddam Hussein is still in charge of Iraq and has 47 countries (including India) doing business with him. What will be Washington's war aim? Once war starts, its result will be determined by only one reality. Has the Taliban government been replaced in Kabul or not? Osama bin Laden may seem like an attractive trophy, but his capture or elimination is not the answer, as any serious analyst will confirm. A martyr is always more dangerous than a living leader. America's real target has to be the movement that was nurtured by Islamabad and has now secured a national base from which a network of disciples and agents can seek and kill across the world. America's purpose will surely be the restoration of the monarchy that

pillaged and raped through the devastations of the second millennium, ending with British rule. The first millennium was serene in comparison. The Afghans have conquered and been subjugated. They have been ruled by Greeks, Persians, Mongols, Central Asians, Indians (Delhi) ruled Kabul for two hundred years), British and Russians. The cliché about Afghanistan is that it has been more difficult to get out than to get in.

War has returned to Afghanistan, but this time with important variations.

Both the United States and Afghanistan will be defending something larger than self-interest.

The United States is fighting for its honour as well as for its leadership of a world it has steadily tried to fashion in its own image, built on the ideals of democracy and prosperity, equality of all citizens and constantly rising levels of material comfort. Afghanistan is in the constant frenzy of a jihad that it has chalked out as its rationale for existence. Kabul will not seek to involve other Muslim countries or their governments to its side. It will seek support from the underprivileged shadows of Muslim communities, from men whose faith leads them to treat death as their gift to a larger cause.

There is a precedence in Islamic history for this phenomenon.

It emerged from the Ismaili sect of the Shias. In the second half of the eleventh century (a period of decline for Islamic power) Hasan-i Sabbah was born. We do not have the exact date of his birth, but by the time he

## America a time to reflect

WASIF ISLAM

I think anyone with a shred of humanity in him/her would condemn the soul shattering events of last Tuesday in the USA. I personally feel numbed and shocked and my heart goes out to all the unfortunate victims of the carnage. How can man do this to man? Who are these people taking away lives of innocent people, young, old, women, children, Jews, Chinese, Bangladeshis, Germans, Christians, Muslims?

President Bush vowed vengeance while waving a flag over the smoldering ruins of what was the World Trade Centre.

President Bush said in his speech to the nation on Tuesday that "we were attacked" because the United States is "the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world," and the perpetrators of the attacks want to stamp out this beacon.

Does this satisfactorily explain why the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon took place? A General interviewed on ABC said that this was an attack by "an enemy who hates us." He gave no reason for this intense hatred nor was he asked to do so.

Are Americans content to accept the president's explanation that they are hated so intensely and these events occurred because this enemy resents their being a country of freedom and opportunity? Are they content to assume that it is their best that brought this about?

That these dastardly deeds were born of envy and jealousy alone? Have you heard of cause and effect? What did the

American Governments 'cause' in the past that we are seeing such a grotesque 'effect'? Who then is really responsible?

Shouldn't the American people ask "what actions of ours could be perceived by some as so terribly wrong as to evoke such hatred and anger and such a ghastly response?" What was the perceived wrong these people were attempting to right? But do they feel that they share in responsibility for wrongs that somehow made those who carried out these acts feel just?

America is a great country. It offers freedoms and opportunities to its citizens. One can be proud of the many achievements they have made. But Americans should also know that their government, acting on behalf of its citizens, has perpetrated unspeakable acts of violence against the citizens of other states. Isn't it surprising and shocking, that Palestinians were celebrating in the streets of Jerusalem and in the stifling refugee camp in Lebanon on Tuesday? Why were people dancing in the streets of cities of Iran? Why were they distributing sweets in Iraq? While the whole world stood trancelike and aghast?

Why did Chile have to go through 17 years of terrible oppression under Gen. Augusto Pinochet after the CIA instigated the coup that led to the death of the democratically elected president, Salvador Allende, in a country that had a history of 100 years of democracy? Why

did the US oust Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala? Why did they spend billions of dollars decimating the countryside of Nicaragua? What about the genocide in VietNam? Why was the American Air force napalm bombing Cambodia? How long did they support apartheid in South Africa and kept other oppressive regimes in office?

More recently, how many babies died in Iraq due to crippling sanctions ordered by the US? Why does the US give away 5 billion dollars to Israel annually so that Israel can buy weapons to kill Palestinians?

American newspapers headlines read

"America: Stunned, Saddened and Now Ready for Revenge." Is revenge what the perpetrators of Tuesday's crimes seek?

Will revenge in return solve anything?

Has America found a scape goat in Bin Laden? They should satisfy the world with incontrovertible evidence against him before attempting any violence.

Why must impoverished, war torn, famine plagued Afghanistan be targeted for punishment due to American lapses in security against terrorism? Again, is the American might pitted against one man, Osama bin Laden? Just does not sound right. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the perpetrators need to be identified and their supporters held accountable.

But revenge, unbalanced by truth, will gain nothing but increased rage and further acts of revenge. Revenge, unaccompanied by self-examination, accomplishes nothing. There are other ways to right wrongs and to resolve conflict.

These are trying times for America, it's

a time to do some soul searching, a time for introspection. The great do not seek revenge, they are not haughty and proud, the great are humble, humane and forgiving.

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