

Vulnerable upazilas

A job cut out for all concerned

THE terrorists are among them," commented Barrister Iftiqaq Ahmed, an advisor to the caretaker government, at a workshop in the city on Monday, apparently taking a swipe at the country's mainstream political parties for their patronisation of terrorism. The fact that 415 out of the country's 463 upazilas have been marked as "trouble-prone" by the home ministry seemingly bears him out. The home ministry's reading of the situation goes to clearly justify the deployment of 55,000 officers and troops of the Bangladesh Army along with 2,000 Bangladesh Navy and 10,000 Bangladesh Rifles personnel on the ground. They will stay on duty in the run-up to the October 1 general election and afterwards for a few more days till the dusts settled. There has been an alarming escalation of political violence across the country in the last few weeks bearing testimony to growing mutual intolerance and irresponsible behaviour between the mainstream political parties as the election date neared. The presence of the armed forces afield is likely to have a deterring impact on the potential lawbreakers. This should be reinforced by their powers to arrest trouble-mongers on the day of election and hand them over to civil authorities. In truth, however, only political parties can ensure a congenial atmosphere by reigning in potential troublemakers in their respective camps.

To go back to Barrister Iftiqaq's comment, alternatives are there to stop violence, and deployment of armed forces on law and order duty is one of them. In an interview with this paper recently, Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant General Harun-ar-Rashid has struck a responsive chord in us by saying, "presence of our officers and soldiers throughout the country will act as a deterrent to potential trouble-mongers and miscreants". We cannot, however, rule out the possibility of election-day flare-ups and subsequent bloodletting. The fact that more than 200,000 illegal arms are still out there in the wrong hands only reinforces our fears. The weapons and their potential carriers need to be immobilised. So, the army has the job cut out for them.

In the ultimate analysis, our entreaties will be with the senior political leaders and the contestants in various constituencies to make sure that there is no breach of the code of conduct.

Peace still holds, thank God

Pacifist voices must expand their moral space

PEACE still holds in what is obviously the most beleaguered time in our recent history. The world has been caught in a violent vortex propelled by a momentum almost entirely its own. Still, the fact that everything hasn't erupted in flames and chaos almost two weeks after the attack on US mainland has brought some respite and hope to scared millions waiting for the extreme unknown.

Some glimmer of hope has surely crept into anxious hearts. Then the fact that the USA has consulted many governments to build its coalition hints that the days of unilateralism may have become less pronounced. By trying to pull in as much support as possible, the western world has become less ethnocentric and the media exhibits greater interest in views from all sides including those who could be possibly affected in future military actions. The fact that there are many views of the conflict despite unity on condemning the terror attack hasn't been entirely denied by the West. Perhaps this has contributed most to the delay of an immediate retaliation. It maybe a temporary respite from the scourges of a major war but millions all over have found the strength to raise their voice against war and terror. Legitimate governments of the people can't deny this sentiment anymore.

The decision by the US government to provide evidence implicating Osama Bin Laden with the terror attacks to frontline states for perusal has been welcomed. There has been great uneasiness on this matter in many quarters and this process should dispel that. Of course, if the evidence fails to stand scrutiny, that will mean a hugely complex situation but this remains a crunch issue. Meanwhile, international opinion is firmly crossing over to pacifist approaches without losing sight of ending global terrorism.

A space for peace has been created but it needs to be expanded. And this can be done by arguing against slaughter of innocents either by the terrorists or as a result of retaliation by the emerging coalition. The moral position of the global majority is now firmly against mass destruction. It must be strengthened and turned into a voice that neither the powerful nor the destructive can deny.

PHOTORIAL

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STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

Life is like that!

And for many more than we could count. About 50 per cent of our population lives below poverty line. Only a small number of them float in cities like them and others. And even them we cannot salvage from the base line in this age marked by wonderful advancements. Are we sincere in our effort for change?

Caretaker government, political parties and general election



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

without amending constitution in a new Parliament, installation of a caretaker government would have been legally invalid.

The caretaker government of Justice Habibur Rahman conducted election satisfactorily in 1996. The caretaker government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmad, however, had taken over in 1991 under extraordinary circumstances and done a creditable job. This year, within hours of taking oath by Justice

People kept on wondering why suddenly Awami League leaders unleashed a vilifying tirade against the caretaker government. It was clear that Justice Latifur Rahman and not his predecessor, Justice Mustafa Kamal, was a preferred choice of the Awami League as head of the next caretaker government. That was one of the factors responsible for the Awami League not to hold election earlier than schedule. Why then did the Chief

judgegement saw it fit to replace many of those officials, who were to have some connection with election matters, both at the central and local levels. If the Awami League thought that the replaced officers were truly neutral, they had no genuine objection to their replacement. The very fact that the Awami League continued to object vehemently to this measure proves that the officials were partisan and were planted by the then ruling party to help them

with adequate and sophisticated smug arms.

Thirdly, rampant and ever-growing corruption at all levels of the Awami League for which it secured the distinction of topping the list of 99 most corrupt countries of the world, according to Transparency International, must have made them amass huge wealth and funds a significant part of which is to be used for election purposes. The relevant code of conduct for election restrict-

false votes and other means with the help of obliging officials. They had to ultimately give up their demand following vociferous protests from both domestic and foreign quarters. This also constituted Awami League's displeasure with the caretaker government and with the Election Commission in particular. The consistent demand of the BNP for removal or to inactivate Awami League's partisan Election Commissioner, is yet to be met. The Awami League appears to continue to count on its co-operation and support.

None of the actions of the caretaker government appear to have been illegal, irregular and motivated, except for their desire to establish an atmosphere congenial for holding a free, fair and impartial election in a peaceful surrounding. Even the BNP and other parties are not happy with the slow progress of recovery of illegal arms and some other measures taken in hand by the caretaker government. When both the contending parties criticise a referee, people do realise he is doing a truly neutral job.

The system of Caretaker government was basically a product of the Awami League's strong, prolonged and violent movement during the second half of the BNP rule from 1991 to 1996. The concept, however, was originally authored by the Jamaat-e-Islam and not the Awami League. The BNP government resisted strongly almost to the end of its tenure on grounds that the proposed measure was unconstitutional. When they conceded to accept the proposal on mounting pressure and to avoid further bloodshed and violence, the Awami League had already boycotted the Parliament and even resigned from it. As a result, no constitutional amendment could be made as enabling legislation for the creation of a caretaker government. Consequently, the BNP held election on 15 February 1996, passed the amendment and gave the requisite legal coverage for the creation of caretaker government. The Awami League violently boycotted the election, totally ignoring the fact that

Latifur Rahman as Chief Adviser, the Awami League and its supporting senior public servants protested against their transfers by the Chief Adviser and went to Hon'ble President with a formal complaint. Since then various actions of the caretaker government came under increasing attacks of Awami League leaders. Even Sheikh Hasina herself stated that the caretaker government was not acting impartially and was working towards helping a particular political party win the election. This is a very serious charge, particularly when it comes from the immediate past head of government and leader of principal political party. Even most objectionable insinuations were made to suggest that the Chief Adviser had been promised the post of President of the Republic by the BNP in return for electoral and other favours. This allegation was strongly refuted by both the BNP and the Chief Adviser. One prominent Awami League leader and former minister even compared the hon'ble Chief Adviser with an ostrich, who hides its face in the sand and thinks that no one is able to see or monitor its activities. Such remarks hardly speak well of the speaker, to say the least, and are counter-productive.

Adviser fell from the grace of the Awami League chief? What wrong did he commit so far following assumption of power? What did he actually do during the past two months or so to deserve such wrath? The people are well aware of the actions taken by the caretaker government till date. These primarily aimed at the creation of an atmosphere congenial for holding a free, fair and impartial election. Can the Awami League deny propriety and usefulness of such a measure? They cannot, yet they have never come out with a statement publicly supporting it.

Among the concrete actions, the first one taken by the Chief Adviser was to replace several senior officers, who had been closely working with the erstwhile Prime Minister and, as per natural human trait, became prone to promote both official and party interests, in varying degrees, of a political Prime Minister. Then came the process of depoliticisation of administration. The Awami League placed in various vantage positions of administration officials of their choice selected out of a carefully prepared list of officials favourably disposed towards the Awami League. The caretaker government in its collect-

win election by all possible means, fair or foul.

Secondly, the caretaker government took special measures to restore law and order in the country. Besides reorganising police administration and trying to make most of them as impartial as possible, the government started to make all-out efforts to recover illegal arms and round up known terrorists. Those who possessed licensed pistols will also have to deposit their weapons with the government. Despite limited success of the operation, the spate of normal crimes has been vastly reduced. Yet, many acts of violence that took place during the present regime mostly related to conflicts between inter and intra-party rival electioneering groups.

The President and the Chief Adviser decided to deploy members of the Armed Forces in order to supplement and reinforce actions of members of the law-enforcing agencies with a view to preventing violence and intimidation during the period of election. Can these measures be objected to in the interest of holding a free and peaceful election? No, no one can. The Awami League could and did so. Why was it done? It is obvious that the Awami League has been trying to equip their cadres

winning election expenses up to Taka five lacs is not only a political hoax but provokes sad laughter. Results of the election, everyone knows well, will depend this time mostly upon the money and muscle power of candidates. Awami League has both, in substantial quantity and number. It would be a Herculean task for the caretaker government to clear this Augean stable. In the process, the government gained further annoyance from the Awami League.

However, success in securing neutral presiding officers and adoption of stringent security measures will determine the extent of rigging at polls. Efforts are being made by the caretaker government to pursue these measures in all earnest but to the chagrin of the Awami League. The lack of desired organisational facilities of the BNP down to the grass root level, on the other hand, posed a veritable barrier to redeem situation in this matter.

Finally, the Awami League's initial reaction against election observers, both domestic and foreign, to enter and observe voting in election centers appeared to have been prompted by their desire to hide their planned actions to rig the election by stuffing ballot boxes with

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Meeting the terrorist challenge: Revenge is not justice

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

R EVENGE is in the air as America prepares to punish suspects in the unspeakably brutal terrorist acts of September 11. Rage and revenge have replaced the early pain and anguish. Descriptions of the attacks as crimes against humanity are giving way to a different language: attacks on "Western civilisation", "our way of life", on American "prosperity."

This parochial shift is reflected in attacks upon ethnic minorities. There are calls to "wipe those people out and... wipe out the country that is hosting them. Just get rid of them all..."

This ugly mood is driving the US to describe the terrorist attacks, ghastly as they are, as "war", and threaten unlimited destruction in "self-defence"—even before there is compelling evidence linking the suspects with Osama bin Laden.

The US wants to counter force with force, terror with terror, an eye for an eye... But as Martin Luther King said, "an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind."

The US is actually threatening wanton damage to life in Afghanistan. Deputy secretary of defence Paul Wolfowitz says the aim of the coming war is "not to capture a few terrorists... it's removing the sanctuaries, removing the support sys-

tems, ending states who sponsor terrorism."

The just-inaugurated Operation "Infinite Justice" could turn into infinite destruction.

Any harsh US military action will produce a terrible reaction—an unending spiral of terror, counter-terror and violence. An overpowering US response—as distinct from use of measured, moderate, force—will be a colossal folly.

Arrogance of power has blinded the US to reality, including hatred against it in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, even Pakistan. Americans are

Today's confrontation is not a war between democracy and terrorism, but a campaign of revenge and retribution. For many people, this war, as West Asia-based journalist Robert Fisk says, is "also about American missiles smashing into Palestinian homes, US helicopters firing missiles into ambulance(s)... American shells crashing into village(s)..."

People in West and Central Asia

are appalled at the US's double standards in condoning one state

(Israel) which ignores Security

Council resolutions, while bombing

sadistic generals in torture.

Terrorism comes in both state and non-state varieties. Indiscriminate violence by governments can be infinitely more destructive than guerrilla terrorism. Hiroshima remains history's worst terrorist act. Sub-state groups' violence pales beside it.

India, to its disgrace, has become America's willing collaborator. It offered its military cooperation even before US agencies had collected evidence on responsibility for the attacks. Many Indian policy-makers and shapers were thrilled at

and intelligence advantages far outweigh India's. On September 19, Gen Musharraf capitalised on this, but linked Pakistan's support to Kashmir, nuclear weapons and outmanoeuvring India.

This has thrown Vajpayee & Co off balance. They are perversely sad that India has "missed the bus." Mr Jaswant Singh has proposed another laughable idea: a "concert of democracies" should conduct the anti-"terrorist" war.

This is only a tactic to isolate Pakistan and build an exclusive relationship with the US. It is based

tically to pull off a military operation against "Islamic" forces. Perceptive observers such as Tariq Ali fear a possible mutiny.

At minimum, Pakistan will witness horrible social turmoil and destruction of its fragile institutions. It could undergo some of the same processes that led to Afghanistan's collapse. This will have horrifying consequences for India too. A nuclear power collapsing on our borders is a nightmare prospect.

This prospect is not fantastic. Breaking into bin Laden's bunkers will need a land-based operation, with high casualties. In Afghanistan, there are no high-value assets like industries or power stations, damage to which can ensure quick surrender. This too spells high civilian casualties.

The 45,000-strong Taliban militia mixes with the civilian population.

Thus, "collateral damage" to civilians will be extremely high.

The US must be tamed through the only available international body, the Security Council. Instead of contributing to that, the Vajpayee government is kowtowing to America. It is doing little to counter the equation of Islam with terrorism, protect minorities and defend pluralism. Terrible times lie ahead.

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rightly horrified at the terrorist attacks, which have probably killed 6,000 people. But they don't even register the deaths of over four million in America's direct or covert interventions: from Angola to Brazil, Cuba to Greece, Vietnam to Zaire.

Half a million children have died in Iraq under cruel US-sponsored sanctions. Americans are equally blind to their government's complicity in Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine and its role in the Sabra and Chatila massacres, which left 17,500 dead.

all others for doing so. They are also enraged by the ruthless repression of Palestine's *intifadah*.

Instead of understanding this, the US is about to compound its epochal folly, in Afghanistan.

We are constantly reminded by the media, and by the government, that the Taliban is a creation of Pakistan, but rarely told that bin Laden is an *American creation*. His al-Qaeda was fathered by the CIA in the "holy war" against the USSR in 1988. Washington has for decades bred terrorists and trained

the "historic" possibility of a new Indo-US "strategic partnership" opened by the attacks.

Our security "experts" salivated: here is India's chance to "vindicate" itself and be drafted as a "frontline" state.

Prime Minister Vajpayee articulated this very view on radio. He must be sorely disappointed that the US has chosen Pakistan as its "frontline" state.

The US is not waging a noble war against an international evil. In Afghanistan, Pakistan's logistical

upon the illusion that democracies don't behave in ways that create and strengthen terrorism. This is dangerously untrue, as the US's own history shows.

Thus, India will be in no position to resist hegemonic pressures for a terrible war in Afghanistan. Pakistan too is drifting into this, driven by the "chance" to become America's "frontline" ally and mask its "failing state" image and Taliban operations.

This course is dangerous. Gen Musharraf won't find it easy domes-

A crucial test for the Americans

The terrorist attack on the WTC is undoubtedly an unfortunate incident. Like all the sane people of the world I also express vehemently my hatred against the terrorists and their associates. The attack on and the destruction of the WTC is certainly a heinous act. All should condemn such an act of terrorism. The participant terrorists are all dead, and they are beyond any punishment. But those who masterminded the plan and those who cooperated with such a beastly and grisly act of terrorism should be traced, apprehended and brought to justice for punishment.

I feel sympathy for the weeping Palestinians when I see them on the TV screen. But I feel sorry for those Americans, who are now openly indulging in the act of scapegoating and showing stereotyped behaviour against the innocent Muslims now living in USA. Of course, I thank President Bush for telling his people not to indulge in such acts. USA is undoubtedly a superpower. But is USA a supreme power? We believe that the supreme power rests with the Almighty Allah. I do not know the

American way of thinking in this regard. If one possesses sufficient power, one may venture to take retaliation against any misdeed of any terrorist. But one should not forget that to have the power of a bull or a buffalo is not bad but to use that power in a bullish way is just beastly. The sad incident of WTC has certainly posed a crucial test for the American Government and the American people to show if their really civilized and truly democratic.

The people of a civilized nation may sometimes be emotion-struck because of some unfortunate incident. But they can never behave injudiciously.

It is not pertinent, nor do I have any ability to spell out any sort of advice for the American people. But I feel to say that before waging a war against the 'shadow of an enemy', the Americans should study and analyze the history of their past behaviour not for centuries but only what they did on the 6th and 9th August of 1945. Alas! The Americans just obliterated in few seconds two cities, killing innocent millions. I do not have any reason to hate the Americans, rather I feel to love them. So I wish that the Americans should pass the present crucial test and survive as a true

civilized nation.

From the immediate reaction of some Americans and from the haughty utterings of President Bush, it appears that there are symptoms of some sort of insanity among the American. They appear to be so obsessed with the super-power feeling that they fail to search for the reasons behind such incidents. I feel that the Americans should ask themselves the most essential questions: Why some people are so much against them that they take the risk even to lose their lives to take revenge against the Americans.