

Desist from destructive politics

Bangladesh needs respite, peace, economic growth

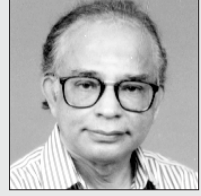
Can we have peace ever? Won't we see the face of happiness through a stable footing on life after all the trouble we have taken so far? An election was held and a verdict delivered by the people through a transparently free and fair exercise of their right of franchise. Independent monitoring teams, who had no reason to profit from which way the election results went, voiced satisfaction over the 'freedom' with which the electorate chose their representatives to parliament. The sporadic incidents of negative nature were noted for what they were isolated slithering off the fringes of the basic impression of fairness observed in the electoral process otherwise.

Now, the Awami League is complaining of the results being not reflective of the 'true verdict' of the people which went the AL way, according to party assessments. The AL is the sole complainant because it is the loser. If the AL had left it at merely as an expression of hurt, or even of grievance over the drubbing it had taken, we would have understood its sentiments; but quite unacceptably, it has decided to cross the Rubicon opting for trouble, more trouble and spiralling trouble, completely detached from the prevailing popular mood. AL chief Sheikh Hasina has taken the path of a total boycott of everything that she, as the elected opposition leader, should have actually braced up to, gracefully bowing out to the popular verdict she would have craved for as she tried her luck next time. Saying 'no' to oath-taking, 'no' to joining the parliament, she has called for wholesale cancellation of election results and wants a re-poll. She is taking to the streets from 5-9 October to stage demonstrations and rallies with an ultimatum served upon the government to cancel the election on or before October 10 or face a 'non-cooperation' movement from the day following. Her wish-list sounds divisive, potentially destructive repugnant to any commonsense view of life. It is devoid of pragmatism expected of a major political party with a long history to fall back on.

This is not the end of the world for Awami League. Many a big political party has risen from the ashes of electoral debacles. Awami League itself has done so, that too, not in the distant past. From its tally of 88 seats in 1991, a resurgent AL with some allies in the tow, went on to bag 146 seats in 1996. So, less than a 100-seat scorecard is nothing new for AL, not something, at any rate, to feel paralytically demoralised about. Even the seeds of BNP's present-day success were sown in its electoral losses of 1996. Besides, for all we know, the intelligence reports filed to the erstwhile government bore premonitions of a poor showing by Awami League at the polls. The percentage of votes polled by the AL also remains unvaried attesting to the very strong support-base the party continues to have. All that the AL needs to do now is to re-evaluate its position realistically in the light of the debacle and behave as the nation would like it to in the role of a vibrant, responsible opposition where they have a point to score over how the BNP had failed as an opposition party. If they assess where they went wrong and tried to remedy the shortcomings it would resonate well with the people as far as bouncing back from the rear is concerned.

So, we urge the top AL leadership to desist from the path of destructive politics. With as many as 50 per cent of the populace below the poverty line, by UN standards, spare the country a space to rev up the economy to a point of reasonable symmetry or we are doomed. We implore them to realise the fact that if they pressed on with a patently unsettling programme of agitation they will lose respect of the people. On top of the loss in elections, the loss of respect is something, we hope, Sheikh Hasina will not like to countenance. If you have love for the country, if the good of the people is all you want, then please, for God's sake, abandon the path of belligerence and work for a better future of the country.

Explaining, not excusing



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THE cataclysmic events of September 11 in America reverberated throughout the world. The immediate reaction was one of disbelief and shock. It immediately gave way to horror, outrage and indignation. After the full import of the terrorist attacks was comprehended there were calls for instant retaliation and retribution against the perpetrators. This call for revenge has now settled into a persistent demand for justice.

Simultaneous with the reactions that ranged the full spectrum of emotions there have been also attempts at analysing and interpreting the attacks. The immediate thinking sought to describe the horrendous events as attacks on civilisation. Others termed them as attacks on democracy and freedom. Tracing the root, the source of the attack was identified as religious fanaticism or to be more specific, as Islamic fundamentalism. But there were also a few analysts saw them as stemming from simply blind hatred.

The worldwide coalition forged under the leadership of America for a campaign to root out terrorism shared the reactions and subscribed to the interpretation with various degrees of conviction and emphasis. With the passage of time and after the heat of the moment views are now being expressed even in America advising caution

and restraint. As regards the target one country has been pinpointed so far as the source of the terrorist attacks and one person has been identified as the mastermind and the prime suspect. In the days ahead or even before this column appears in print the nature of the retaliatory attack and form of retribution will unfold. But one thing has been made very clear by the US administration and their close allies. It will be a long campaign fought on many

widespread belief of their faith being contaminated, even corrupted by ideas and practices coming from outside their faith. The examples of followers of their religion adopting ways of life akin to alien culture are the grist to the mill of this form of fanaticism. All these changes in the way of life follows in the wake of modernisation and since modernisation is a western model it is mainly secular. This penetration of secular ideas from outside is an anathema

conditions.

In their campaign to insinuate fundamentalism in the way of life of the followers of their religion the fanatic religious leaders may fulminate against alien culture and call for its renunciation. But they do not call for physical attacks on the practitioners of that culture if they belong to another religion. They see their battle as one of ideas and the goal to win over the minds of people who believe in the same religion.

extreme form as represented by fundamentalism which in many ways is a reaction to the past or even to present trends in society. When the fanatics of fundamentalism use terror against their own religionists to impose the orthodox doctrine it amounts to violation of legal rights and is therefore nothing short of a crime. Reformist movements in religion are not uncommon but the frenzied call to shun everything modern is detrimental to

fanaticism could be perceived feelings of persecution, or examples of injustices being meted out to their fellow beings. All these feelings of grievance might have gradually crystallised into pugnacious hatred. When that hatred reached its climax and became blind the fanatics took on their mission of conveying hatred in the most gruesome fashion. *International Herald Tribune* in its editorial on September 13 wrote, "It is just as important to remember the intensity of the hatred to pull it off. It is a hatred that exceeds the conventions of war, that knows no limits, abides by no agreements." It is also a hatred that does not speak but acts, as if terror unleashed itself is the message.

So one way of concluding about the roots of the inhuman and barbaric acts of September 11 would be to hold secular fanaticism fed by hatred responsible. It is of course quite possible for this brand of fanaticism to be infected by religious feelings if the constituency on whose behalf the perpetrators appeared to act belong to the same religion. This however is an explanation and not an excuse. Terrorist attacks that kill innocent people indiscriminately cannot be rationalised, nor justified whatever the explanation. Their crimes are of the most inhuman and abominable type and as such everyone, whatever the faith or belief, has to unite against them. The crimes perpetrated calls for justice, but justice with due process of law. Any other form of justice would only vindicate the terrorists. Terry White, the Anglican church priest, who spent five years in Lebanon as a captive in the hands of Islamic militants recently told the interviewer on BBC: "Don't only focus on the symptom, treat the disease." Like the campaign against the terrorists, justice meted out should also take many forms.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

The fact that some of the terrorist used to visit bars and other night-spots to enjoy themselves prove they were of secular character and modern thoughts. But they were quintessential terrorist all the same. The sources of their fanaticism could be perceived feelings of persecution, or examples of injustices being meted out to their fellow beings. All these feelings of grievance might have gradually crystallised into pugnacious hatred. When that hatred reached its climax and became blind the fanatics took on their mission of conveying hatred in the most gruesome fashion.

fronts, some visible, others covert in which a number of countries will participate according to their convenience. At the same time it has been emphasised that it is not going to be a war against Islam. This is being repeated again and again as if to debunk the initial belief about the "clash of civilisations".

If the sustained campaign is to succeed in its full intent it is important to plumb the depths of the minds of the terrorists to ferret out their motives for wreaking deaths and destruction. There is no doubt that the terrorists were fanatics in orientation because only fanatics are blind enough to destroy the lives of innocents and their own. Fanaticism is usually bred by religion. It also stems from hatred and commitment of a secular nature. Fanaticism arising out of religion is fuelled by fundamentalism. The believers of a religion may be converted to fundamentalism when there is a

to the "true believers" because it weakens the hold of religion. This inroad is not only perceived as insidious but also as a threat to the religious way of life as perceived by the fundamentalists. Fundamentalism therefore propagates for restoration of the puritan way of life and the pristine form of religion. In doing this it harks back to the past and tries to revive many aspects of life that became anachronistic by the advent and spread of modernisation. Because of the retrogressive steps fundamentalism inevitably verges on obscurantism. But even with this severe image of fundamentalism when the majority of a nation are bypassed by the modernisation process they can be won over quickly and with ease. Fundamentalism's advantage is that in such circumstances it touches a rich vein of discontent rooted in social and economic deprivation. Its seed germinates in disparity in living

The true believers i.e. the fanatics want to purify the polluted minds of their own community who have gone astray. It is not the call to the believers to adhere to orthodoxy which is disturbing. Rather, it is the denial of many basic human rights and democratic principles that the extreme manifestation of fundamentalism entails which is cause for alarm. The victims of excesses committed by religious zealots are their own co-religionists. The victims are not believers of other religions, at least not as long as they stay neutral. But even this distinction does not make a fundamentalist regime or its fanatic followers less abhorrent or more tolerable. However bleak the situation there cannot be any rationalisation for moving the clock of progress back. Nor can there be any justification for denying the basic rights and human dignity of people in the name of religion. In fact no religion sanctions the

progress. On the other hand, political leaders in charge of the destiny of the countries have to see that there is no sharp confrontation between religion and modernity and ensure that modernisation does not pass the majority by.

Being preoccupied with internal agenda confined to their co-religionist, the fanatics of fundamentalism may not target a foreign country or a foreign population unless they are threatened or attacked by them though they may relish their discomfiture. It is therefore quite possible that the terrorists who mounted the dastardly attacks on the September 11 in America were not fanatics of the fundamentalist variety. The fact that some of the terrorist used to visit bars and other night-spots to enjoy themselves prove they were of secular character and modern thoughts. But they were quintessential terrorist all the same. The sources of their

Terrorism is the effect of a cause



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

ONE thing leading to another is the world heading for a conflict? Those who subscribe to the prophecies of Nostradamus are talking about the Third World War. George W Bush, the US President, initially called it a crusade, but then termed it as a clash of good and evil as soon as he realised that the word crusade had a historical connotation for the Muslims. Last week, the Italian Prime Minister talked indiscreetly in his country's parliament as if it was going to be a confrontation between the Western Civilisation and Islam. Call it anything, but all signs lead to the possibility of a conflict. While the blood boils in the veins of the Americans, the temperature is rising across the Muslim world as well. The first anniversary of the *intifada* ended in more bloodshed, fuelling the raging fire of the Palestinian hatred for Israel. The Pakistanis are divided over its support to the Americans in hunting down Osama Bin Laden. The Afghan Taliban are

roaring out threats to America, whether they have the means to implement those threats or not. The Iraqis have become wary again, vowing to deal with America if attacked. The Indonesian fundamentalist groups have already warned that should America strike in Afghanistan, they would retaliate on US property and citizens on their soil. The repercussion of the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11 is having a centripetal impact on rest of the world. The gyre of vengeance

It is perhaps perfectly healthy to seek reprisals as much as it is to let out bad blood clotted in a bruise. Every religion or common sense sets this ground rule: an eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth. This is to prevent revenge from becoming its own religion. But every religion also talks about forgiveness or mercy as a supreme virtue, when revenge is tamed like a wild beast and displayed in carnivals. Ask any Palestinian, and he will tell you how he inherited the sleek beast of revenge from his father ever since

religion, or the freedom of Palestine? In 1825 a bunch of Russian rebels was arranged in formation in the square in front of the Senate at St Petersburg and mowed down by cannon fire. "Yes, we shall die," one of the rebels said prior to the execution, "but it will be a fine death." Let us say one has the freedom to choose his own fine death, but what right does one have to kill others? One of the comrades of Russian revolutionary Nechaiev asked the

since 1948, each link of rage perpetuating the chain of retribution. It is difficult to separate right from wrong in the moral swamp of that retribution. When Churchill had ordered the firebombing of Dresden killing 35,000 people, the casualty was five times more than that of the terrorist attack in the US. But Churchill had the moral pendulum of his time swung to his side: Dresden was in Germany, which had declared war on the rest of the world, and it was alright to strike at the enemy

lately on the world, including many Americans who are protesting against "cowboy patriotism". The American children and youth interviewed on campuses are asking their leaders to think before action, to understand if America had done something wrong in the past, which could have led to the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Last week a gunman entered the Swedish parliament and sprayed bullets on its members, leaving fourteen people dead. Many times in America, trigger-happy students have gone on shooting spree, killing innocent classmates and teachers. A frustrated postman entered a post office in Boston and gunned down his colleagues. Earlier, another psychotic killer had gone into a diner and killed innocent people he hardly knew.

None of these is comparable to the carnage in US on September 11. But these are cracks in the window of terror undulating in the seething passions of deranged minds and disconsolate souls, irrespective of their religious, political or geographic bounds. While America and its allies hunt for Osama Bin Laden, one will hope that they will also go to the root of terror and deal with its cause, not just the effect. Otherwise, one thing leading to another, the cycle of rage and retribution might escalate in future and draw the world into a terrible conflict.

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CROSS TALK

While America and its allies hunt for Osama Bin Laden, one will hope that they will also go to the root of terror and deal with its cause, not just the effect. Otherwise, one thing leading to another, the cycle of rage and retribution might escalate in future and draw the world into a terrible conflict.

is getting wider and wider as the pattern of vendetta and counter vendetta gets prolonged and intensified. Revenge is amongst the most original and deadly passions of man, when he wants to get even with his enemy if not destroy him altogether. It was a practice amongst the aborigines of Australia to chop and roast the flesh of an enemy and then devour him in the symbolic act of eliminating him from the world. The Tupinamba tribe in South America had turned revenge into an art. They captured the enemy, let him consort with one of their women, and then killed him and his baby to increase the impact of revenge.

the children of Jacob formed the Jewish state in 1948, and how he vows to feed its ferocity before leaving it to his children for nourishment. One of the terrorists who went down with the plane, which crashed in Pennsylvania, was an Egyptian whose family drives a Mercedes and owns a seaside home. He was educated and had everything to gain from life only if he chose to live. It is not so much to sympathise with a terrorist as to embark on the track of that elusive animal, which prowled the dark recess of his heart. Why would a promising Egyptian youth give up his life at its prime for an abstract thing like pride for his

same question, "What right have we to take a man's life?" The answer he got was, "It is not a question of right, but of our duty to eliminate everything that may harm our cause." Suddenly, there seems to be a surfeit of causes in the world. The Palestinians have a longstanding cause, so do the Israelis. The Iraqis, the Iranians, the Taliban, the Pakistanis, and now the Americans and its allies have their own causes as well. The cause of one leads to its effect, which in turn leads to the cause of another, which again leads to its effect, and so on. It would seem that the world has been on an endless stretch of cause and effect

even if that meant death to many innocent women and children. Irish novelist James Joyce compares between pity and terror. Both are the feeling, which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings. But pity unites it with the human sufferer, whereas terror unites it with the secret cause. For over half a century the Palestinians have been struggling not to keep their cause a secret. The question is whether they have found enough support for their cause, whether the world has united sufficiently with their sufferings. That realisation has been dawning

PHOTORIAL

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PHOTO: STAR

Traffic mess

Yes the traffic is most atrocious on Dhaka streets. It's a 'conglomeration' of anything and everything you call contraptions of sorts, not just mixed traffic. And they just go awry. No body is taking the charge to tame them effectively so that we can feel calling it a traffic 'system'. Of course there is the traffic police. But not capable enough or willing enough to bring about the desired discipline.

Elections 2001: Political fallout

ZIAUDDIN M. CHOUDHURY

THE Awami League has been soundly defeated. So stark is the defeat that over a dozen ministers and state ministers did not find their way back to the Parliament. In any civilized country a defeat of this magnitude for a political party would normally lead to the resignation of the party chief acknowledging that this was a monumental case of leadership failure. Unfortunately in Bangladesh this is not going to happen. In stead of owning up to this colossal defeat, the leader of the defeated party is already crying foul play, that the elections have been rigged, that there was a deep conspiracy of the anti-liberation forces to thwart the Awami League. This is the same rallying cry from her that the country had been subjected to whenever her government or party had been criticized in the past. The cry is rooted to the belief of the leader that the Awami League and liberation of Bangladesh are two sides of the same coin; they go hand in hand. Opposition to Awami League is opposition to Bangladesh.

It will be unfortunate if the Awami League under a leadership suffering from an absolute paranoia bordering on obsessive compulsive disorder launch the country into another protracted chaos protesting the election results. The country

may never see a smooth transfer of power process, which is the essence of democracy. I am afraid this may happen as the present Awami League leadership never learnt from history; it never could rise above parochial politics, it never held the country above its own self interests. It does not realize that Bangladesh nationalism, patriotism, and the glory of liberation are not the monopoly of a single political party. It does not realize that its proprietary view of the war of independence has helped to spawn an array of political forces that were exactly not fighting the war for independence in 1971.

The intransigence of the Awami League leadership to acknowledge any other partner in the liberation of Bangladesh led to gradual alienation of thousands of freedom fighters and a great number of intellectuals in the country resulting in their apathy to the political process that evolved over time. In its zeal to equate patriotism with its own partisan politics, the Awami League helped the growth of a coalition of forces that drew elements from groups that shed blood for the country's independence to the very groups which caused this bloodshed. In its frenetic obsession with monopoly over Bengali nationalism and aggressive canvassing of the party as the sole vanguard of liberation, the current leadership of Awami League lost touch with a

whole generation of Bangladeshis. This is a generation which needed to be informed the reasons why a predominantly Muslim East Pakistan would fight a war for its independence from a country which was intended for the Muslims of the subcontinent. This is a generation which needed to be told how a fight for preservation of culture and language morphed into a political battle for survival. Very importantly it needed to learn about the people who laid their lives in this war for survival, and the ideals they stood for.

The greatest casualty of the Awami League failure is not their inability to lead the country out of economic and political chaos, and definitely not their loss in the parliamentary elections. The biggest casualty of the myopic and confused leadership of Awami League, and its attempt to claim sole ownership of the war of liberation, is the secular ideal on which Bangladesh was created along with the leader who led this vision. Through its intransigence in refusing to separate the persona of the founding father from its narrow party goals, the Awami League leadership paved the way for the detractors of Bangladesh to create an image of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that is solely partisan. The Awami League leader spent much of the past five years in pursuing more an agenda

of revenge, and manipulating public opinion through emotional statements, and less on establishing the secular ideals that Bangabandhu and the founders of Bangladesh stood for. More time was spent on trivializing his name by christening institutions, roads and bridges after him than pursuing goals of economic emancipation of the people that the founding father dreamt of. The consequence of five years of Awami League agenda is that the forces which were opposed to the independence may likely rewrite the history of Bangladesh. Because of Awami League's preference of partisan politics over national interests, the same brush tarnishes the image of Sheikh Mujib. Bangabandhu became merely a leader of a political party, and it would be open season for the detractors of Awami League to launch attacks on him and deny him his place in history.

Today, the irony of it all is that independent Bangladesh has voted to keep out the party from power which has steadfastly maintained that it was the lone vanguard of the country's independence. To a new generation of voters this proprietary view of Awami League of the country's liberation did not sit well, and majority of them spoke against it. However, this should not trouble Awami League. What must trouble the party, and its leadership in

particular is that its actions over last five years have unleashed an array of forces who were not exactly on the right side of the war of independence. What must trouble the party and its leadership is that its actions have severely undermined the image and reputation of the founding father of the country. So much so that there is a real danger that the real founders of Bangladesh and the ideals they stood for may become mere footnotes to history.

This is a time of introspection for Awami League; it should look deeply into its leadership, not to find faults elsewhere, not to smelt conspiracies where they do not exist. Failure to win even one third of parliament seats, failure of the ministers who normally have more wherewithal to please their constituents cannot be wrought by any conspiracy. If there is a conspiracy, it is a national one; and the bulk of the nation took part in it. The Awami League leadership should realize that the loss of one election should not bring doom for a political party but the loss of ideals will surely bring it, not only for the party but the country as well.

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