

Human tragedy unfolding in Afghanistan

Allow the UN to play its legitimate role

NEARLY four weeks since the terrorist attack on the US mainland—with the word 'retaliation' receding into the background—here we are now jolted by the US-British war on Afghanistan into realising that the world remains vulnerable to humanitarian disaster at intervals. There have been recurrent air strikes on Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad. These are targeted to demolish Taliban installations and Al-Qaida training networks of Osama bin Laden, the most wanted man on the US dossier. The 'collateral casualties' in terms of innocents dying or being maimed, could be poignantly huge. And if the attacks are sustained, as seems to be the likely scenario with an apparently infinite mission in motion, then we are in for a humanitarian disaster of a frightful enormity.

When 6,000 souls of different nationalities and religious faiths were decimated in the rubble of twin tower disaster in New York, the global commitment to fighting terrorism was writ large through their martyrdom. We also thought then that it was out of character with the dawn of a new century to have begun on such a note of wholesale disregard for human lives. But the same seems to be happening now, albeit under a different connotation. So deeply outraged the world had been by the dastardly mayhem of the suicidal mission that countries without any exception grieved with the US government and people pledging to combat terrorism in a concert. The spirit was global, the action should have been global without a fault.

Terrorism is an undefined cross-border phenomenon with links to drugs, money, weapons straddling different forms of racketeering to thrive. It cannot be uprooted by any single country or a group of countries, however powerful it may be. At another important level, there is political and ideological militancy whose roots run far too deep to be excoriated by any spectacular ad-hoc military action. On the ashes of one Bin Laden might rise another of his ilk. There is no scope for any grandiloquent design to fight terrorism, it has to be fought with a serious unpublicised profile over the long haul. Is there any point in terrorising people out of their homes in the name of uprooting terrorism?

Moreover, those who engage in a war, especially a convoluted war in a hostile territory tend to have their own casualties to count. War means deaths on all sides, including those of innocent non-combatants in the country under attack. The USA and UK must, therefore, avoid being caught in a war-trap.

The world cannot court a massive humanitarian disaster in the name of fighting terrorism. The elderly, the women and the children of Afghanistan who could not flee the threat of war are likely to be the victims of the air strikes. Then the attacks will almost certainly trigger a mass exodus of refugees into countries like Pakistan and Iran which already have four millions of them since the Soviet occupation days of Afghanistan two decades ago. The plight of millions more is being imperiled now.

We urge the world community to bring the potential human disaster at the center-stage of global concerns. The UN has been bypassed once again in a test-case situation where a global approach was direly needed to contain it. Let the UN be involved at once, not merely by way of invoking its relevant resolutions on terrorism, but also to give the UN Security Council a hands-on role in the newly war-ravaged Afghanistan.

Khaleda makes a right move

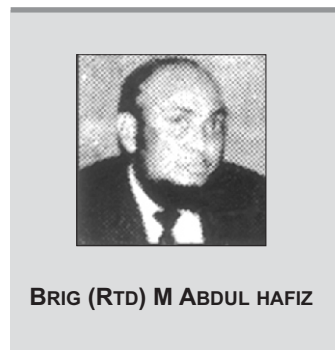
Hasina should respond positively

THE signs are encouraging indeed. Prime Minister-designate Begum Khaleda Zia has issued a clarion call to her political rival Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina to put the past behind, come forward and work together to build the nation and improve the people's lot. In a happy coincidence, the Awami League has decided not to go ahead with the country-wide non-co-operation movement it planned immediately after unofficial results of the October 1 general election had indicated a humiliating defeat for the party. Hardly have there been such positive developments at the same time in opposing political camps.

The BNP chairperson, who will be sworn in as the prime minister of the Republic on Wednesday, deserves credit for the constructive tenor she has set following the four-party alliance's landslide victory in the elections. Her statement to the press on October 2 was essentially aimed at sobering the overzealous elements in her own party and its allies. "No more terrorism... I am appealing to the people to help stop all sorts of terrorism from this moment," she had said. She followed her plea with a stern warning to her party leaders as well as their relatives that actions would be taken against anyone involved in unlawful acts. On Sunday, too, she hammered on the same point.

More importantly, she has acknowledged the fact that despite a huge majority in the parliament, the alliance cannot run the affairs of the state without effective participation of the opposition lawmakers. Thus came her call for reconciliation. Now the ball is in Sheikh Hasina's court and her words and deeds in the next few days would determine what sort of parliament we will have this time around. She has certainly taken a positive step forward by shifting from a hardline position. The next step, we hope, would be effective representation of opposition views in the Sangsad by the AL lawmakers.

Man the world is pitted against



BRIG (RTD) M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE equation, Laden versus the World, is grotesque indeed. But that's what has emerged from last four weeks of diplomatic and military acrobatics in the transatlantic capitals after the US President Bush vowed to revenge the recent terrorists' strike in the United States and pointed his accusing finger to Osama bin-Laden, the Saudi fugitive now holed up in Afghanistan, for the crime. The Anglo-American war machines are already arrayed against him and moved within the striking distance of the battle-zone which is however yet to be precisely pointed out. The NATO allies have accepted the terrorists' attack on the US as an act of aggression also against them and invoked the Article 5 of the alliance charter. Both the US and her key European allies are briskly rallying support for action against Laden, the 'prime suspect' notwithstanding the controversy over the action's legal and normative aspects. While President Bush gave a clarion call for a 'crusade' against the terrorism symbolised by Laden-led Islamic militancy, Prime Minister Tony Blair issued stern warning against the Taliban to hand over Osama or give up power in Afghanistan. The UNGA has been in a marathon session to deliberate on and sign anti-terrorism agreements by its 190 member-states. Taleban and Al-Qaida assets are frozen as a part of anti-terrorists measure in the US and Britain both of whom called upon other countries to follow the suit. Bush has made it abundantly clear that those who would not

support the US effort to fight terrorism would be considered to be on the terrorists' side. As a result, almost all countries have willy-nilly lent support to the US' anti-terrorists drive.

The special efforts are afoot to co-opt the support of Arab-Islamic world, thought to be the breeding ground of international terrorists and Muslim countries around the world. The facilities of varying nature have been asked for from the

targeted by so much of forces and lethality in history. But even as the US prepares for a violent reprisal, she is experiencing serious problems in tailoring a Gulf-war style worldwide coalition. It seems that the world is far from unified behind Bush's plan with many in Europe, Russia, China and Middle East openly expressing doubts about America's call for vengeance. There are fears that George Bush may not prove as

igniting a 'clash of civilization' between the Western and Islamic world. Italy's prime minister Berlusconi ruled out sending his country's troops into action. Fearing a violent backlash even Pakistan, the US' newly revived ally, is seeking to cleave a tenuous middle ground by taking non-confrontational line with the Taliban and avoiding the promises of direct military support to the United States.

asm in cobbling together a coalition, even in Europe it is still a hazy proposition. The Middle East and Washington-based diplomats from that region are increasingly vocal about their misgivings about a US-led military campaign. Therefore, fashioning a coalition that includes Arab-Islamic states, as it was during the Gulf war, will be major challenge for the US diplomacy. Many Arab countries have qualms in supporting the

machines are enough in military term to ensure an overkill of their anticipated targets. But the problems lie elsewhere. The military strategists are divided over how to go about a war against an anonymous enemy that does not show up its face. The only enemy that has so far been presented in conventional term is Osama bin-Laden who is merely a shadow, a phantom and a particle of shifting sand against the imposing mountains of Hindukush where he remained lost for years. He could not be brought under the sweep of a barrage of 80 cruise missiles fired in 1998. It is only the matter of chance and not the flag waving warships, the fleets of fighter bombers or long range missiles tipped with deadly warheads that have been assembled around the battle zone, to be able to hit Laden who needs only a couple of meters in the curb of hill, valley or a ravine to hide himself. Neither the specially trained commandos ignorant of the wherewithal of fighting in one of the world's most treacherous terrains is likely to be able to hunt him down. Even if it does the baffling question still remains: will that be the end of terrorism? Even in Western perception, bin-Laden is more than an ephemeral human being. He is an idea, a concept and a spirit that prevails the world over. Will it be possible to kill the spirit right or wrong, that has inspired millions across the world? Even if it is possible to do through a sustained fight on multiple front is that cost-effective? Why not instead strike at the root of terrorism that provokes a man in despair to register his grievance even through his self-destruction? A just, fair and evenhanded dispensation of all political, economic, territorial and ethnic problems of the world will significantly reduce terrorism only at the fraction of the cost involved in a war being waged now. It's all in the mind requiring only an honest soul searching.

Brig (Retd) M Abdul Hafiz is former DG of BISS

PERSPECTIVES

Why not instead strike at the root of terrorism that provokes a man in despair to register his grievance even through his self-destruction? A just, fair and evenhanded dispensation of all political, economic, territorial and ethnic problems of the world will significantly reduce terrorism only at the fraction of the cost involved in a war being waged now. It's all in the mind requiring only an honest soul searching.

countries around Taliban-controlled Afghanistan where Laden is supposed to be hiding since 1996. For decisive military action the main focus is, however, Pakistan which under 'pressure' already promised blanket support to the US in the latter's fight against terrorism. The EU leaders have already been in the region to be apprised of the prevailing ground realities. The US officials will soon be in the Arab countries, considered vital for anti-terrorists campaign, to enlist their unequivocal support. The British Prime Minister Blair also has undertaken a whirlwind tour of the region to ensure a leak-proof arrangement to close the ring around Osama bin-Laden who only two decades ago made a common cause with the Americans in fighting the Soviet invaders. He is now the FBI's albeit the world's most wanted man with \$5m reward for his capture since 1998 bombing of US embassies in East Africa. The pursuit continues to rope in the still reluctant countries to form an international coalition against terrorism which, when complete, will pit almost the entire world against one single man, a singular distinction for bin Laden. Never before an individual was

adroit as his father was in forging international coalition during the Gulf war. While intensive diplomatic efforts are on to build a global coalition in support of military retaliation against the bases of terrorism, the biggest upset has come from Russia. Moscow does endorse the US' anti-terrorism drive but is reluctant to offer military support. It may not allow the US even to use its bases in Tajikistan. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two of the US' closest allies in the Arab world have routinely expressed condolences over the tragedy in America but stopped short of unreserved support for a military campaign against terrorism and have reservations in allowing bases for military action. In Europe itself there are signs that a strong transatlantic loyalty could dissipate if the US' military retaliation proves clumsy. The feeling in Germany and other European country is that international terrorism only be fought by dealing with the underlying political, economic and territorial causes of it. Germany is candid in its willingness to accept risks even in military terms but not adventures. Going a bit deeper the French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine warned against

In the meantime, both the US and the allies are stuck in terrorism's definitional riddle, its scope and strategy of fighting. Washington, unsure of a clearcut approach to the problem, is suggesting and seeking wide range of assistance, not just military backing. As the US administration has not so far been able to spell out its demands in definitive way to the countries concerned for obvious reasons, the responses have also been equally ambiguous. It is therefore unavoidably taking long for the differences to be ironed out. The 'total solidarity' expressed in the immediate aftermath of the Black September tragedy already started having cracks when it came to the specifics. The initial pledges of the cooperation with the US in its worldwide fight against terrorism were later qualified with cautionary or sometimes outright contradictory notes. Many countries were circumspect on the question of committing troops. Several European leaders suggested that their support for Washington should not be seen as a carte blanche particularly when it came to the participation of their troops. Consequently, despite Britain's disproportionate enthusi-

United States which is viewed as perpetrator of injustices to the Arabs/Palestinians, as the patron of Israel, their enemy, Iran, a frontline state of likely battle zone, has already refused military support and use of her soil in ensuing conflict. China, while supporting the US' anti-terrorists measures has repeatedly demanded clear evidence of Laden's involvement in recent carnage in support of a military reprisal. India has been one of the earliest to condemn terrorists' strike in the US and extend support for anti-terrorists measures. But the extent of her support in military term remains ambivalent. President Meghawati of Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country added her voice to the chorus of leaders in Washington supporting the US' war against terrorism only to find her people on return seething with anger over an impending strike against Afghanistan. As a result of these developments the chances of a quick US riposte, if not the calculated one, seem to have petered out. Even if there is no immediate formation of a coalition the combined strengths of the US and British forces together with their war

OPINION

Minority voting issues: When Shamsur Rahman protests...

DR ASIF NAZRUL

A LETTER of protest by poet Shamsur Rahman that appeared on October 5 in some national dailies has drawn the attention of many conscious citizens. In that, the poet raised objections to the use of his name in a statement of the leaders of South Asian Conference against Fundamentalism published on October 4. That statement denounced impeding the minorities from exercising their voting rights in the just-concluded parliamentary election as well as repressing them, both during and after the election. It also rejected the result of the election and somewhat irrelevantly made arrogant remarks suggesting that a pro-fundamentalist, pro-Taliban government led by BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia is about to be installed in power following the election. Shamsur Rahman asserted: "I strongly protest that statement since I have no involvement with it." On Saturday he resigned from both the Nirmul Committee and the South Asian Conference.

Shamsur Rahman is not only our cardinal poet, but is also regarded as the conscience of Bangladesh. The inclusion of his name without his consent in the controversial statement raises questions about

the mentality of people who did it. Most of the signatories to the statement are, however, well known figures in Bangladesh. One section of them had vigorously campaigned against the fundamentalist leaders in the 1 October election. This could have befooled up their expectation. But that did not happen to that extent, mainly because their campaign was also directed to assist the victory of a particular political party which itself did not take any meaningful measures to curb fundamentalism and had been quite similarly guilty of exploiting people's religious sentiments during the election. It may be the debacle of that party which has enraged the said statement-makers to the extent of blaming and branding the BNP as leader of Taliban. Such castigation could pose a serious threat to the interest of Bangladesh in view of the present polarization of the world powers against the Taliban in the wake of 11 September terrorism in the US. Besides, it tantamount to dishonoring the verdict of majority of the electorate of this country who voted for BNP led 4-party alliance, and at least 80 per cent of whom have no connection with fundamentalists, let alone with the so called Taliban. The said statement centered around the voting rights of the minority community in the country.

The allegation that the minority people were not allowed to cast their votes has been surfacing in a section of the press since the day after the elections. If the rights of the minority are really infringed in a systematic and coordinated manner and if that affects the election results, it is of course condemnable and disgraceful for the nation. But before jumping into such conclusions, one has to be sure about the factual basis of any such allegation. The constituencies where Hindu voters are largely concentrated include the following: Narail-1, Bagerhat-1, Khulna-1, Barisal-1, Pirozpur-2, Barisal/Pirozpur, Netrokona-1, Shariatpur-1, Shariatpur-2 and the three seats of Gopalganj. In these, the Awami League (AL) candidates won by overwhelming margins in three constituencies of Gopalganj. At Gopalganj-2, Sheikh Selim alone bagged 185 thousand votes, whereas the rest polled less than 12 thousand votes in aggregate. At Gopalganj-3, Sheikh Hasina bagged 154 thousand votes while the total number of votes cast for all other candidates is less than 10 thousand. At Gopalganj-1, the BNP candidate got only one seventh of the votes the AL candidate received. Seventy-eight to 89 per cent of the voters participated in

these constituencies whereas the overall percentage of vote cast in 1 October election neared 75 per cent. BNP candidates in two constituencies at Shariatpur could not come anywhere near the electoral battle. Of these two constituencies, the rate of vote casting at Shariatpur-1 is marginally less than overall percentage i.e., 75 per cent. But organisationally the BNP-led 4 party alliance is too weak in this area to disenfranchise any particular class. The two candidates (nominated and rebel) of AL here got more than 150 thousand votes in aggregate, while the BNP candidate received only 734 votes. Should anyone be expected to believe that the party that polled only 734 votes had attempted to disenfranchise a stronghold of several thousand minority voters of Shariatpur-1 and had succeeded in doing that! Narail-1 features as a constituency where the BNP candidate fought closely in the election. Dhirendranath Saha, the BNP candidate at Narail-1, is himself a minority member. He won last three consecutive elections as an AL candidate and one major reason behind his success was the absolute support of the minority community in this constituency. After he had become a turncoat in this election, is he supposed

to invite the further risk of obstructing the very minority voters who supported him so long? Even if anyone did it for him, has that affected the election result? The answer is No. Sheikh Hasina herself is the winner here. Instead of prolonging the discussion, we can devote our attention to two aspects of minority voting. 1) Of the 12 constituencies mentioned above, the voting percentage in seven exceeded the overall percentage. In most of the constituencies, where the voting percentage is 75 per cent or above, the percentage of Muslim voters is around 70. Given that 80 per cent of them had voted, of the 75 per cent vote cast, the Muslim voters account for 56 per cent. That means the remaining 20 per cent of the votes cast came from the minority community. Going even by this conservative estimate almost 66 per cent of the minority did exercise their franchise in these constituencies. 2) Of these 12 constituencies, AL (nominated or rebel candidates) bagged 8 in contrast with BNP's 3. Anwar Hossain Monju, the leader of one fraction of JP who had also been in the immediate past cabinet won the remaining seat. It favours, in spite of the electoral tide in favour of BNP in the just-concluded election, the success rate of AL in minority

concentrated areas is three times that of BNP. Given this, cannot we derive the conclusion that even if the minorities were disenfranchised on sporadic occasions, it did not influence the election results? One more interesting thing that may have escaped our notice is the failure of GK Chowdhury, a former BNP MP and the younger sibling of SK Chowdhury, to get elected. SK Chowdhury did win, but in a much narrower margin compared to the 1996 election. These two constituencies feature a considerable number of Hindu voters. In spite of the election tide in favour of BNP at the just-concluded election, the two brothers' performance was far better in the 1996 election. Does this indicate the Hindu voters managed to cast their vote in this election or they could not do that? Given the track record of Chowdhury family, which one of these has higher possibility? Irresponsible propaganda or overstatement for the minorities does not yield anything positive for them. Neither does any propaganda against them. Rather, both add to their fear as well as vulnerability. It is imperative that everybody comprehends this.

Dr Asif Nazrul is Asst. Prof., Dept of Law, University of Dhaka, journalist, novelist.

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.



STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

No roof for resting

A tired man takes a nap while the other leafs through a magazine by the side of the road, as there are not too many places in the city where people can take rest for a while on a scorching summer day. The authorities could put up sheds beside the road and install water fountains to supply drinking water, improve the atmosphere of the parks available so that dwellers can relax or take respite from the unbearable heat.

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

Father of the Nation

Thank you for your commentary ("Recognise Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation", October 7) appealing the BNP chief Khaleda Zia to recognise Bangabandhu as Father of the Nation. Indeed, it is time to leave all the negative pasts behind and march forward towards positive future. I, too, urge upon Begum Zia to be magnanimous enough and do everything necessary and humanly possible to unite our severely fragmented nation.

At this juncture of time we need, not a narrow minded myopic leader, but a leader with vision, courage, broadness of mind and magnanimity. Begum Zia has all these qualities inherent in her as was in her illustrious husband. Our leaders, unfortunately, have a habit of claiming all credits and disclaiming all discredits. Let everyone get one's due share of both credits and discredits. The main theme is to go forward with everyone, not leaving anyone behind. At the same stroke of pen, I wish to urge Sheikh Hasina to change and accept the reality and put the interest of the country and democracy above everything else. She should concede to the defeat in the election and try to find out the real cause of her party's debacle. She must not boycott the Parliament, must play appropriate role of the opposition using parliamentary language (in

fact both the treasury and opposition members must avoid unparliamentary language in the floor of the House).

Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia should remember that people are watching and scrutinising their moves. If Awami League plays its role properly and correctly, they table may turn towards their side in the next election.

A.S.M Fazlul Karim
Chittagong, on e-mail

Like many times before, you have again tried to bring the two leaders of our country to their senses. You have echoed the thought of millions of people's of this country including me. I wholeheartedly agree with you and hope that Khaleda Zia would be magnanimous enough to recognise Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation. Journalists like you have always been the spokesmen of human causes. Please continue writing these types of articles in future.

Shahana
Uttara, on e-mail

Indeed it was a right appeal at the right time. Like Mr Mahfuz Anam, we also believe that time has unfolded an opportunity in front of Khaleda Zia to take a giant step towards democracy. By recognising Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation BNP would lose nothing rather it would defi-

nately gain respect as a farsighted party and it would bring a huge positive change in our political culture.

Khaleda Zia already has shown great maturity in her actions after the elections. We do believe on this issue of Bangabandhu, Khaleda Zia would come forward and make Awami League's assumption wrong by recognising Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation. It will not only reconsolidate the nation but also would make Khaleda Zia a leader to be remembered by all countrymen.

We request Khaleda Zia to take this bold and historic decision and let us be proud of a democratic nation.

Md. Kabir Hossain
Elephant Road, Dhaka

Responsibility of BNP

All these five years and one hundred days people of Bangladesh had been waiting to exercise their constitutional right to vote for one more time to elect the MPs. We have received the results of the verdicts of the people throughout the country. Party wise positions of the final results of 282 seats have been officially announced. The results of the remaining seats will be made known when re-polling is held.

Whatever be the final outcome of the election, the majority party in the parliament will assume the responsibility of ruling the country for yet another term of five years. I request

the party in power to carefully go through their election manifesto and the pre-election promises the leader of the party and the party members made before the people of Bangladesh from time to time. The party chief, the elected representatives and the prospective cabinet members must ensure compliance of their promises.

Bangladesh is beset with multifarious problems and all of these have reached Everest high level. Therefore, all these problems have to be dealt sincerely and effectively from the very beginning of assuming their office. I feel that priority should be given for ruthless handling of corruption, law and order, terrorism and economic and social mismanagement. The wrong doers must be brought to book and punished without any fear and favour irrespective of their party affiliation and rank in the society. There should be a time frame and reports should be made public through the media.

Finally, all the elected representatives must voluntarily take oath in declaring their wealth which should be updated annually and made transparent. The people of Bangladesh want restoration of their constitutional rights.

Badrul Alam, FCA, on e-mail

General election-2001

The country cannot afford another election and there is no reason why

the result of a free and fair election cannot be accepted to a certain quarter. General public and foreign observers have confirmed that the election was held in a free and fair manner. Then why is it too hard for the Awami League to accept the poll result?

However, for reconfirmation and to remove doubt and any suspicion, the caretaker government may suggest a referendum to be held. Alternatively, let the Supreme Court give the verdict whether the election was free and fair in order to save the country from any threat or deadlock.

Shahid Iqbal
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Hoping for a bright future

In the just concluded national election BNP and its allies won over two-third majority in the JS while the Awami League won just over sixty seats. But this does not mean that the voters have totally voted against the Awami League.

The bottom line is that people wholeheartedly and overwhelmingly rejected terrorism and nepotism. We do not want to divide the country into pro and anti liberation forces. Our young generation wants to see what lies ahead of them and what our political leaders could do for them. Definitely they are looking for a bright future and do not want to live with the past history.

Iqbal Ahmed, on e-mail