

## Home Minister's sweeping remarks

*Adversarial mindset will not be helpful*

HOME Minister Altaf Hossain Choudhury has spoken in a stereo-typical fashion of his predecessors at a press conference the new government leaders had called to clarify its position on the minority repression issue. While acknowledging some incidence of attack on the minority community, the minister dismissed most of the press reports on the subject as being 'baseless, exaggerated and politically motivated'. How many cases of mayhem, rape or appropriation of property will have to occur before reports on them would be deemed as credible and unexaggerated?

When the 1998 floods were developing into a deluge and the papers reported it, their coverage was regarded as exaggerated. Much the same way when the print media in 1999 took up the dengue theme in earnest warning the government of an impending epidemic the newspapers were quickly rebuked as going overboard. Now, regrettably, within a week into his job, the home minister is crying 'wolf' about the 'exaggerated' reports playing into the motivation of some vested political quarters who are allegedly even using money for maligning the government early in the day. Not surprisingly, the minister who joined politics only the other day and has little administrative experience in the mainstream of governance could only make such sweeping remarks on the print media. The essential thing to realise is that if the newspapers had not reported the incidents how could he have known the gravity of the situation. Would he have made those visits on a helicopter hadn't there been such an avalanche of news reports? The basic function of the media is to nudge the government into action where it is most needed. The minister says, the official reports and the news reports do not tally with one another. Mr. Minister, they usually don't. The official reports are what the government would like to hear and the newspapers worth the name would report only the facts, however unpalatable.

It is the smug reliance on so-called official reports that has ruined many a government. We would have been the happiest if what has been reported did not happen at all. Unfortunately, the unexpected has happened. A wholly dismissive attitude to newspaper reports with the calumny of conspiracy cast on them is patently self-defeating for any government that wishes to do justice to its electoral mandate. And what is specifically so disparaging about it all is that it can hardly give any reassurance to the minority community. The pity is, the veteran politician and senior cabinet minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan was beside the home minister when the latter was making those sweeping comments on the press. They will do better to use the press as an alarm clock in all such matter.

## Discard hosting summit, not NAM

*A less glitzy meeting could provide platform to the unheard South*

THE Government has decided to cancel the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) summit meeting earlier planned by former AL government to be held in Dhaka next year. The Awami League government had decided to host the meeting without consulting the cabinet, the foreign ministry, not to speak of the parliament. A group of self-aggrandizing officials might well have convinced the previous PM of the need to hold such a meet keen as they were on international recognition for Bangladesh and a global profile for the then prime minister. But the decision was an expensive one, certainly beyond the means of the official coffers. The requisition of land, the building spree, the hugely ostentatious constructions had seemed at odds with the poverty level of not merely Bangladesh but also that of many participating countries. The decision to cancel makes a statement against conspicuous spending from public coffers.

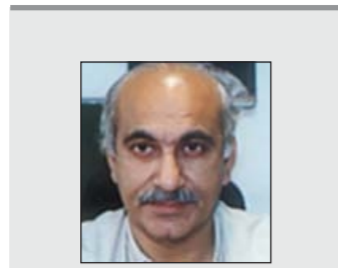
But the manner in which the meeting was cancelled wasn't seemly at all. It tended to belittle the NAM movement as a historical heritage, and that was uncalled for. There is a window of opportunity in this movement especially now which can help many developing nations which should have been recognized.

The NAM is not dead as many are saying but moribund which is why a revival is necessary. The idea of the unipolar world has overwhelmed other ideas including that of non-alignment. The fact that unipolarity doesn't dissolve the difference between the developed and the developing countries has now become clear. In the present backdrop of international conflict and a world split between the "terrorists" and the counter-terrorists", the absence of the neutral space which NAM could provide, is more acutely felt.

The NAM is probably more about the North-South divide than any other reality. Groupings like the G-77 and the LDCs prove how serious this problem is but it remains ignored by the developed world. In fact, the developing world, full of nations not interested to be part of any ideological camp, has no political platform in the global arena. And NAM is able to provide that.

Instead of discarding the meeting, Bangladesh could very well hold a less glamorous version of the summit. It can be focussed on substance and not just be glitzy. The NAM can and should be given the momentum it deserves and in today's world is more urgent than ever before. South Africa had made some innovative financial arrangement by getting the foreign private companies involved. So we should look into them.

# How many countries can you bomb, George Bush?



M.J. AKBAR

HOW many countries will you bomb to reach Afghanistan?

The Iraq war of 1991 ended, effectively, within about 72 hours of the start of Operation Desert Storm. The rest was politics.

Operation Infinite Justice, or Infinite Freedom, or Finite Injustice, or whatever it is called just now, is, in a similar sense, already over. Afghanistan no longer has the means to defend itself against the awesome firepower of the American and British forces. We have already entered the political phase of the operation.

This by itself is unexceptionable. All war must have a political purpose; there can be no other purpose, since no one wages war against Afghanistan to loot or pillage the country. There is nothing to loot and pillage. Which in turn brings us to the problem: how long will it take for the political aims of this war to be achieved? President-General Pervez Musharraf was talking a military language when he spoke of a short war. The air action to eliminate Afghanistan's military capability is over. American bombs can now search, locate and destroy clusters of targeted political leaders or families, which is why relatives of Mullah Omar are beginning to die. But President George Bush is the one who is more correct when he recognises that this is not a short war, because it is being waged against the perpetrators of terrorism. Mr Bush would, however, be very wrong if he believed that the length of this war is going to be determined by the time required to eliminate the camps and bases from where terrorism is planned and

where its training is done.

The place where the attack on the towers of the World Trade Centre or the Pentagon began was in the mind. It began in conviction. You can eliminate leaders and camps, although even here there are problems. What are you going to do? Close down all the flying clubs in America? Or bomb flying clubs all over the world? But these questions are secondary to the basic one: how are you going to eliminate the next generation of young men who see

even destroy trees and vegetation; it is as clear as that.

But the excesses of the response against America find an echo because of the perception in the Muslim mind that America has, over the last fifty years, and particularly through its pro-Israel policies, perpetrated unacceptable injustice against any cause dear to Muslims. Little angers the believer more than injustice.

This might seem ironic to a scholar of American history,

great Muslim empires, the Ottoman in Eurasia and the Mughal in South Asia. If the Ottoman became the "sick man of Europe" in the nineteenth century then the Mughal became the "sick man of India" in the eighteenth century. Both lost their eminece to the rising power of Western-Christian colonialism, led principally by Britain, with France taking its share of the spoils in the middle east and Africa, and Russia seizing central Asia.

The rise of Christian power was

intellectual experience, Dante. I cannot, in all honesty, even begin to repeat what Dante wrote about the Prophet, and these are lines that are savoured by Italians up to this day. It is no accident that the most vicious comments that have appeared about Muslims and Islamic civilisations have come from the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi. Of course Italy, like all European nations in the last quarter of the twentieth century, has consciously altered its politics and its policies

relationship was there any attempt by either side to vilify the sacred. Battles may have taken place over the concept of idol worship but Muslim poets including Iqbal, since Iqbal continues to be a bugbear never denigrated Krishna or Ram and Hindu poetry never vilified the Prophet. It was just not part of the culture of this subcontinent.

The Americans, and this is their tragedy, have inherited a European history that they did not create and from which they are, as a people, culturally and emotionally distant. In fact when the European powers coolly distanced themselves from the slaughter of Muslims in Bosnia, it was America under Bill Clinton that intervened on behalf of the Muslims to stop the most insane and cruel slaughter of a community in Europe since the second world war. The United States was after all created by refugees from European religious bigotry, so they do not need lessons on this score. Even today everyone searching for refuge in the United States seeks a liberal Utopia. But the fact of their superpower status, and equally the fact that it is a Christian nation, has turned the United States into a symbol of past iniquity and modern injustice.

This is the complex problem that faces the United States as it attempts a multipronged solution to the most difficult dilemma in its history.

Paradoxically, what the United States might itself want, in the near future, is what might be called a non-American response to the problem of terrorism. You cannot bomb terrorism out; on the other hand, each bomb may be a seed for a future that could be more terrible. Muslim nations across the world have to balance the sentiment on the street with their legitimate anger against the use of a strategy that threatens their stability as much as that of the United States. The lead to find a rational response to an emotional problem has to be taken by someone.

Why cannot that lead be taken by India?

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their mission as one of death in a cause whose enemy is the United States and every government that supports the United States? Surely that is the question that must be haunting Washington. Afghanistan is not geography. There is now, and visibly so, some part of Afghanistan in every country with a Muslim population. What do you do about that? How many countries do you bomb, George Bush? The answer, as Bob Dylan might say, the answer is blowin' in the wind.

The politics of the Afghanistan syndrome begins when conventional war ends. The Taliban are not relevant as a symbol of good governance or any civilisational values, whatever virtues they may claim. They have only one thing going for them. They are an anger that has found a political base.

It is important to repeat and stress that much of their strategy is directly opposed to the message of the Holy Quran. Ayats or verses of the Quran are specific and unambiguous in their command that in a Jihad (and one might add, particularly in a true Jihad, for Jihad itself has become a shorthand for so much misunderstanding) you cannot kill the innocent: children, women, the elderly. You cannot

not simply political and economic; it also had a cultural component that left deeper wounds. In an echo of the rhetoric of the original Crusades, Islamic civilisation was denigrated as barbaric and bigoted, and the Muslim turned into the caricature of the rapacious, sex-starved Turk in drama, poetry and that much-read Victorian invention, salacious pornography. In India we saw how, for instance, the kings of Awadh were vilified when the British needed to destroy what was left of a self-destructive, decadent nobility. But the caricature of kings was nothing as compared to the vilification of the Prophet himself.

Nothing could have been more hateful to the Muslim consciousness than this. Interestingly the most vicious of the Prophet-baiters came from a country that was never able to defeat the Muslims militarily and perhaps found some impotent sustenance in pseudo-intellectual viciousness. This was Italy. The Italian Roman Catholics became the worst and most abusive of the Christian communities who defamed the Prophet. The best example is available in the poetry of the man who is the Homer of Italy, and whose work is still at the heart of Italian literature and the Italian

towards Muslims, but the Berlusconi lava flowed from an old national volcano.

The combination of political defeat and religious-cultural insult has left a deep resentment among Muslims against what they see as Christian imperialism. Muslims never fail to point out that there is no instance whatever in Muslim literature, thought or consciousness of any disrespect to Jesus. Indeed, there cannot be, since Muslims revere Jesus as a Prophet, and the Quran confirms the virginity of Mary although it denies him the status of a son of God.

Perhaps the Muslim attitude towards Christianity might have been tempered if both the Mughal and the Ottoman empires had not been eaten up by the British-European advance. If, to take a hypothetical instance, the Marathas, with Ibrahim Khan Gardi in their van, had defeated the Awadh-Rampur alliance led by the Afghan Ahmad Shah Durrani, and the Mughals been replaced in Delhi by the Marathas, the Muslim response might have sought less one-dimensional answers. But this was not to be. It is pertinent to point out that nowhere in the Hindu-Muslim

## OPINION

# Intolerance, violence and unlikely solution

SHAMERAN ABED

Intolerance seems to be the word at the tip of everyone's mouth as they try to find some explanation for the behaviour of our major political parties and their workers leading up to our country's eighth Parliamentary elections. The reported number of deaths due to clashes between the activists of the BNP and those of the AL far exceed a hundred over the last two months. This trend seems to be increasing with time and it is difficult to see how we can rid our politics of violence. But it can still be done and it must be done now before it is too late.

Intolerance is the incapacity of respecting the views of others. That is, views that differ from our own. But it does not end there. We not only do not appreciate or respect views that differ from our own, we try to deny others off their right to hold such views. This is felt most strongly in our politics, where leaders and activists seem to prefer to kill out in the streets than to engage in constructive debate in the house. If they were really committed to democracy, they would not only accept differing opinions as a necessary element to democracy, they would have welcomed it.

What is most disturbing about our political situation is that parties do not differ in ideology, but hate each other on grounds that are purely personal. Anyone who has cast an eye over the election manifestoes of the two major parties couldn't have failed to notice the overbearing similarity between the policies of the two parties. Two parties of such similar ideology would have long since merged in any civilized political process, for their intentions would be to move forward their policies, not themselves.

However, the situation is vastly different in our country. The mutual

hated that exists does so because our politicians find it surprisingly difficult to separate their political lives from their private ones. The idea that two people of opposing political opinions could respect each other for their beliefs and perhaps even be friends in private life is alien to them. Our politicians do not have one good thing to say about their counterparts in the other parties. And even if they did, they would not say it in public for fear of backlash from his or her own party.

The blame for this unfortunate situation must be assigned, in a large part, to our two main political leaders. It is the responsibility of the leaders of the parties to set the example for dignified behaviour. It is up to them to define the way in which their party should operate. However, they themselves have been the worst examples of personalizing politics. Both our leaders spend more time criticizing one another than telling us how they wish to bring about the years of prosperity they promise us. The leaders go from one political meeting to another, each time listing the 'sins' of the other parties, yet hardly mentioning the policies they have set forth in their manifestoes. I am tired of hearing about the BNP's 'anti-liberation tendencies' and about the AL's 'misrule'. I would be more interested to learn how exactly the BNP plans to eradicate terrorism and where AL plans to get the necessary finances to build a 'New Dhaka'.

The leaders of the two major parties do not only further this culture of personalizing politics and breeding hatred by their own behaviour, they reward the most notorious perpetrators of such unsavoury behaviour by nominating them time and again and, in some cases, giving them Cabinet positions. This no doubt sends a clear message to

all party activists on what is expected of them if they wish to rise up the party hierarchy.

Hence, it is of no great surprise that political violence is an ever-increasing phenomenon. Violence is also seen as political activity, a way for the party activists to let the high-ups know that they are working, as opposed to non-violence, which shows inactivity. This kind of mindset is taking firm roots into our political culture with the passing of each day, especially at a time like this.

The parties also defeat the very purpose of going to polls by not accepting election results. It is hard to understand why a party would throw itself at the electorate and then not accept the electorate's verdict. I believe it has something to do with the bitter enmity between the major parties. After repeatedly reminding us of the 'sins' of the others, it is a bitter pill to swallow that the electorate still preferred the other party. Our political leaders go as far as to tell us that we, the electorate, would never vote for parties other than their own because we want peace and prosperity in the country. We, of course, do want peace and prosperity in the country. But this practice of telling us what we will and will not do suggests an attempt on their part to make our decision for us. After such bold statements, it is understandably difficult to accept that the electorate did, indeed, vote for the others.

The most worrying thing is that by doing all this, the parties are spoiling the nature of politics in our country forever. With each bomb blast and each death, with each baseless accusation made against opposing parties, our political parties are successfully alienating themselves from honest and well-meaning political candidates. The increasing importance of money and muscle in

order to survive in the world of Bangladeshi politics is a major discouragement to all those who wish to do politics in a constructive climate.

There is one way to rescue our politics from this road towards permanent destruction and ruin. It has to come in the form of initiative

from our two leaders. It must start at the top if it has any chance at success. Genuine commitment, perhaps even a joint effort, is required to change the way politics is conducted in our country. Punitive action must be taken against those who resort to violence. Tolerance must be preached as a necessary

ingredient to a real democracy. The leaders must lead by example and show the way to their respective parties.

Shameran Abed, currently a Sophomore at Hamilton College, USA, is the founder and coordinator of Vision for Bangladesh.

## 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.



PHOTO: M.A. MOHIT, A FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER

### Young farmers of the sea

Youngsters are busy catching fish fry to sell to the hatcheries. Shrimp fry fetch good and easy money for these young people and their families. There are many others like these kids who are in this business. But these children often don't go to school and the lure of quick money prevents them from being educated. Earn and learn programmes could help these children a lot.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### Naipaul's honour

While I don't begrudge the honour--- Nobel Prize in Literature--- conferred on V.S. Naipaul, I must qualify the gushing praise for Mr. Naipaul that has inevitably followed with a reality check of my own.

Some of Mr. Naipaul's writings and commentaries on Muslims and the Islamic world have been, at best, thoroughly shallow and ignorant; at worst, deeply bigoted and downright malicious. Consider his travelogue/novel "Among the Believers" as a prime example of the above. Also, his reported early and varied associations with Hindu revivalist circles help explain his badly disguised antipathy to Muslims.

Perhaps, everyone is too polite or impressed to call him a Hindu 'extremist'---an epithet that is unfairly flung at religiously assertive Muslims everywhere with remarkable unanimity. Nonetheless, hav-

ing read some of his works, I concede that Mr. Naipaul is a truly talented novelist. I can't help suspecting, though, that the present climate of heightened Western paranoia about and disdain for Muslims only boosted the prospects of winning the coveted award for someone like V.S. Naipaul. A congratulatory expression of solidarity from a Western institution to a man whose sentiments often mirror its own.

Sajjad Husain  
one-mail

### Money laundering

More than one hundred million dollar of assets have been frozen all over the world says the Washington Post. As per AFP news agency, the US President has frozen funds equivalent to six million dollars in thirty accounts of AL-Qaeda in the United States and twenty other

accounts in other countries of the world.

This reminds me that a major bank with branches all over the world run by Muslims and headed by a Muslim was closed by force by both the United States and Britain jointly. The Bank of Credit and Commerce popularly known as BCCI was closed by applying force of the major powers of the world because the Bank was keeping the accounts of terrorists and helping them in laundering their money. I would like to ask the US Ambassador and the High Commissioner of Britain as to whether the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Britain will close the operation of the above Banks and Financial Institutions since they were keeping the accounts of the terrorists? Or will these Banks and Financial Institutions not be touched because

these belong to non-Muslims?  
Badruddin  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

### Join JS

AL has no choice but to attend the JS as the opposition, simply because it cannot boycott the parliament for the second time, having invented the game. This second loss in the general election has brought up the same reaction in the adolescent party poll rigging. Already the world opinion is against the AL. We Bengalis have to shun sentimental politics.

A Mawaz  
Dhaka

### More reading materials

I remember the days when Statesman of Calcutta and Dawn of Karachi were available in Dhaka.

These newspapers were full of news, views, articles, columns and many more reading materials that would cover a whole day for an avid reader. I am glad to see that for the last few years some newspapers in Bangladesh are trying to follow the same trend. We feel happy to receive newspapers with weekly magazine and some other supplements.

However, these newspapers may be made more attractive if some special sections are added everyday. Columns on interesting or sensational court cases, mishandled medical cases, special obituaries, biographies, travelogues etc also make good reading.

Mohammad Alauddin  
Retired Member (M&O) BTT, Dhaka

### Grace in defeat

I can't help but be saddened by the childish display of the AL leaders

after the poll result. On the election day, only one thought came to my mind--- will the losing leader accept defeat? Well, they didn't.

This seems to be the trend in our country. When will the leaders learn that the need of the few does not outweigh the needs of the many?

I hope and pray that the coming days are peaceful and the leaders show some dignity and grace by accepting the facts. How can one forget the 2001 US elections? There were 'faults' in that election too but did Al Gore go on strike?

Ahsin Alam,  
one-mail

### Hypocrisy

Recently, along with the newly elected BNP, the right-wing fundamentalist parties-- Jaamat-e-Islami and Islamic Oikya Jote paid homage to the martyrs of the war of inde-

pendence at Savar mausoleum and then to the language movement martyrs at the national Shahid Minar.

Though these people are the elected MPs, I find their presence at these two memorials an insult to the memory of those who shed blood for the independence of our mother tongue. Many members of these two parties harbour an anti-liberation spirit or were collaborators of the Pakistan army in 1971.

I can understand the PM's obligation to her allies. However, I do hope that the Government would recognise the hypocrisy in 'Jaamat and IOJ' participation in such events and that in future, they would be instructed to refrain from attending such ceremonies.

Abdul M. Ismail  
Liverpool, UK, one-mail

### Ridiculous

In your September 29 issue, two cartoon portraits of the two main political leaders were printed. Your cartoonist did not apply any humour or art in drawing the BNP chief's face; rather he expressed his personal grudge by drawing this vulgar and unimpressive picture which one can easily understand comparing the two pictures of the AL chief and the BNP chief. Moreover, the BNP chief's name was spelled incorrectly.

The same picture was again published on October 9 issue of the Lifestyle magazine. Are you intentionally printing this picture which has no resemblance to Khaleda Zia's face?

Noortamam,  
one-mail