

## Don't re-enact Mazar-i-Sharif on Kandahar

*UN should play a hands-on role, Pastuns need to be taken onboard*

IT has been a mind-boggling massacre, strikingly avoidable and poignantly outrageous for the fact that it was perpetrated on a besieged and holed-up band of pro-Taliban soldiers in isolated quarters of Mazar-i-Sharif. With a US air attack covering for (!) the US-British special forces and the Northern Alliance soldiers on the ground, one wonders whether the use of force was proportional to the resistance provided by some 670 battle-weary Taliban and their Pakistani and Arab *Jehadi* brethren.

The human corpses strewn within the small prison compound (with some of their hands tied from behind), the dead horses, twisted metals, unused ordnance and smouldering grounds were all testimony to a hugely unequal attack mounted on a basically helpless group of besieged soldiers. Neither were they making their last stand nor was it any attempted showdown on their part as is evidenced by the Taliban's own admission of the fact, at an earlier stage, that negotiations were going on for their safe passage. This had gone on for a few weeks before the attack came raising a question thereby as to whether negotiations were given a full chance. Clearly, the military will prevailed over what could have been a mini-UN brokered release of those pathetically cornered Taliban forces.

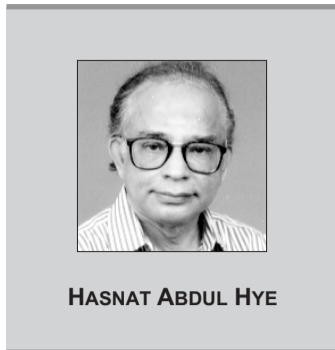
While strongly condemning the act of savagery we find it somewhat conscience-salving though that the ICRC and the Amnesty International are looking into the self-evident human rights violation as a result of the combined air and ground assault on the small Taliban fortification. They seem keen to set human rights standards for all concerned in Afghanistan. We welcome this agenda and want it adequately addressed.

All our worries are now centred on Kandahar, the last Taliban stronghold, or shall we call it outpost, given the stupendous territorial losses they have sustained. Nobody would like to see any repeat of the Mazar-i-Sharif butchery in Kandahar, where fearfully, the size of the engagement is likely to be much bigger. In this theatre, the coalition forces, Northern Alliance, some Pastun chiefs around Kandahar, and above all, the UN representatives must join issues to head off such a menacing possibility.

In the much-vaunted Bonn talks, a tentative agreement on an interim council with former king Zahir Shah as its head, has been seemingly reached. But on the vital question of an international peace-keeping force being dovetailed to an interim arrangement, the Northern Alliance has expressed its strong reservations. Given the Northern Alliance's track-records between 1992 and 96 we think it is highly imperative that a UN-sponsored peace-keeping force be deployed to stand guard over the anarchist tendencies among various feuding tribes and their war-lords in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the very concept of a broad-based multi-ethnic national government dictates that the majority Pastun community is not sidelined because of their Taliban antecedents.

The immediate tasks comprise restoring the wreckage of a transportation system into a workable condition and reaching succour to the millions of destitute Afghans. If an interim administration can be put in place quickly, well and good; but if that is not possible then we should have some satisfactory mechanism to address the relief issues immediately. That phase over, the much-touted massive reconstruction work has to begin.

## Afghanistan, at sixes and sevens?



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THE collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan should come as no surprise. With their second world war vintage arms facing the high-tech military might of the Coalition they did not have a ghost of a chance. What is surprising is the time it actually took for their rout to take place. Even with the awesome fire power neither the Anglo-American coalition nor the Northern Alliance could tell how long the military campaign of degrading weapons and annihilation of forces would be.

When the collapse came the Taliban regime fell like a house of cards in most of the territory held by it. As one Taliban stronghold after another capitulated the myth of Taliban unravelling. Far from being a unified and stubborn force they revealed the fragile stamina of a rag tag army eager to turn tail or throw up arms in surrender. The forces under the Northern Alliance sashayed into Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz and Kabul like lithe models in catwalk. Herat and Jalalabad were grabbed with aplomb by tribal warlords outside the Alliance no sooner than the Taliban forces left in great disarray. While the defeat of the Taliban was a forgone conclusion very few people in Afghanistan and beyond believed that they would end with such a whimper. Though the Taliban acted in pure self-interest their decision to flee or surrender

should not go without appreciation. It averted a veritable blood bath which would have involved innocent civilians also. But whether wanton bloodletting can be avoided or not now depends on the anti-Taliban forces occupying the cities and to whom the Taliban are surrendering.

Very few will shed tears for the Taliban and almost no one except them will mourn the demise of their abominable regime. Their records

more than an uneasy alliance of self serving groups most of the time. The age-old tradition of fiefdom and warlordism based on tribal allegiance has been a boon and a bane at different periods and historical circumstances. The history of Afghanistan shows that only when there is a highly autocratic regime or an alliance based on reasonable power sharing that the centre has held its own against fissiparous tendencies. It is only

there is a vacuum after the fall of the Taliban. The standard procedure for nation building in Afghanistan, as in a manual for doing anything complicated, would have included the following steps. Firstly, a UN peacekeeping force would secure the major urban centres and maintain law and order there. Secondly, an interim administrative authority would be put in place also by the UN. Thirdly, an election would be held on the

country through the presence of armed elements. Whatever the outside world may think of Afghanistan as a political entity, to the warlords and the tribes parochial interests come first and national interest only later. By allowing the warlords and Northern Alliance to capture the major cities in the wake of relentless bombing the Anglo-American coalition forces have unwittingly encouraged them to become firmly

cannot be too strong for them. If some concessions suit their strategy they will make them appearing to be generous. In the face of concessions deemed to be against their interests they will become intransigent crying foul play. The greater is the military power on the ground the more implacable will they become throwing a challenge to weaker warlords and also to the international coalition. Except withholding economic assistance, no harm can be inflicted on the recalcitrant party or parties. Ground reality in Afghanistan at present will thus become *fait accompli* presenting a mosaic of fiefdoms. At best a federal authority with no substantial power can be chalked up at the end. For a war-torn and ravaged country like Afghanistan that will hardly be a giant step in the direction of nation building. Can it be that this may be opted for as the second-best solution?

Whatever agreement is reached at the end, it has to be based on consensus of all parties representing Afghan population. Outsiders can goad even cajole but should not force the Afghans to accept a solution to their political problem. It should be clearly understood by now that the Afghans are fiercely nationalistic when it comes to foreign interference and domination. This lesson from the past should not be lost even when the need for international help to rebuild the country is overwhelming. Internal squabbling and internecine fighting may peter out after a while if they are not aggravated and sustained by outside help. By ensuring non-interference by foreign powers the Coalition can make its greatest contribution to nation building in Afghanistan. It calls for a mission for the long haul and towards that end the journey has just started.

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

### IN MY VIEW

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of atrocities, repression and acts of zealotry are horrendous. Whatever they might have said in official propaganda their obscurantist regime was an unmitigated scourge for the Afghans, particularly women. Millions must have prayed for their overthrow and now that the prayer has been answered there is understandable jubilation inside Afghanistan and satisfaction beyond. But in this euphoria thoughts about the future of the country cannot be far from the minds. The history of Afghanistan bears testimony to the fact that ringing down the curtain of a regime does not automatically usher in a new and stable one. Good governance, as it is understood by and large, has seldom been experienced, the country having been stuck in a time warp. Afghanistan, steeped in its unstable past, has a natural tendency of allowing things to "fall apart". The "centre cannot hold" because centre is a misnomer being nothing

when there is a reasonable power sharing in the centre reflecting the demographics of the tribes that a stable government can emerge in the country. In the achievement of this national consensus the tribal warlords play a pivotal role because they represent their tribes through tradition and most importantly, by dint of armed authority.

The need for a broad based national government has been in the cards as soon as the war against the Taliban was declared. Even the Northern Alliance recognises the need for this. But there has been no blue print or even an understanding on the outline of a future government after the fall of the Taliban regime. In view of the importance of the task and its far-reaching consequences and given the massive build up for the military action the state of unpreparedness by the coalition of countries and by the UN is unbelievable. It is also intriguing because no one had any doubt as to what would follow if

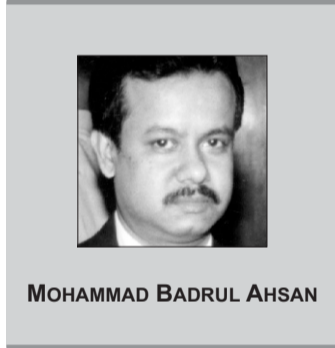
basis of a formula (constitution) agreed upon by all tribal authorities. Finally, absorption of various armed elements in the national army would take place according to a formula that reflects the tribal population.

Instead of following a procedure as mentioned above (echoes of which can be found in what was done in Cambodia, Bosnia and Kosovo) Afghan tribal representatives have now been invited to a conference in Bonn to discuss about the future government. Not only they do not have any draft plan before them, the most important tribe Pushtun is also not adequately represented, raising questions about the credibility of the negotiation. But more worryingly, the initiatives and proposals in the conference may have been pre-empted by ground reality in Afghanistan. Already different tribal groups represented by the Northern Alliance and the warlords have more or less carved up the

entrenched. In the negotiating table these military-cum-political forces cannot but use their occupation of territory as bargaining counters. Already they are grumbling about the presence of a small British army unit in Bagram air base near Kabul. They are also not favourably disposed to the idea of a multi-national peacekeeping force either. Though Northern Alliance rode to victory on the back of the Coalition's airstrikes, they don't seem to be beholden to them. Their intransigence may only become stronger over time to the dismay of the Coalition unless addressed timely with tact.

The occupying forces know that possession is not only nine-tenths of ownership, it is also a powerful symbol of authority. Being firmly ensconced the occupiers of Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Jalalabad and Kabul know they are already in power with recognisable territory. The urge to make concessions in the greater interest of the country

## When a mother is dying



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

AT the age of eighty something, she is like a runner who is about to touch the finishing line. She does not open her eyes, she does not speak and she eats her food through a tube, while a plastic bag hanging on the side of her bed gives tell-tale sign that her body functions are dismantling. She lies in bed, the left half of her body paralyzed from a stroke that destroyed her nerves like a mischievous enemy. She is a traveler booked on the return flight, her ebbing vitality marking the trail of an arduous struggle to erase life.

She is a mother of eight; her children scattered from her like the pearls of a broken string. They visit her every now and then, never all at once because they are too busy to converge at any single time. She conceived them, gave birth to them and raised them to become men and women. Now the seed is disappearing once the tree has grown.

Doctors believe that she suffered the stroke as a result of a silent stress, her mind boiling in the heat of anxiety that cannot be diagnosed. A mother she is, who needs mothering of her own, doc-

tors warned. She has become a child in the retrogression of life in the progression of age. She has completed the journey of life in the circle of fate that leads every destination to its origin.

She does not recognize people anymore—friends, relatives and even her own children. They sit around her and try to tell her so many things, and then they weep because the living throbbing woman, who is their mother, has become a block of flesh that is

womb collecting her dissipating body. The children sit around her listless body, and break in tears from time to time, because the entity motherhood they had taken for granted was no longer within their reach. They reminisce on their mother, how she was strong after their father's death and protected them from enemies. They praise their mother, and then await her response, hoping it would surface on her face with a smile or smirk.

carried away. They talk about their mother, and then argue with each other. They talk about inheritance, property, bank accounts, jewelry, and gradually raise their voices. Then they get upset and walk away from each other like petals falling off the corolla. The mother would not move or say a word. Her eyes closed, she would gasp for breath like a fish out of water.

English novelist George Eliot writes that the mother's yearning is the most complete type of life in

Mother is the origin where he came to being, the woman who fed him with her own flesh and blood and trudged with his burden in her womb for nine long months. Whom does he call in pain and hardship? It is his mother. Whom does he call when he is sick and suffering? It is his mother. Whom does he call when he is afraid and aggrieved? Mother.

Mother is the magic word that spells many wonders. It heals wound, cures disease, mitigates

that they themselves are mothers, they know how life unfurls within life that binds the mother with her offspring in the trussing of eternal bliss. Perhaps one man's death diminishes another, but mother's death depletes the daughter for the same reason tributaries are exhausted when the river is spent.

The brothers have an uneasy calm amongst them. One of them claimed that the last words of their mother before she entered this silence expressed her desire to return home. Others did not respond to what he said, and embarrassed him with their silence. He looked from face to face, and realized his mistake. His brothers thought he had meant to give them a hint that he no longer wanted to look after his mother. Smitten by shame, he repeated his mistake and pleaded his brothers to believe what he had said.

They all bent upon their mother, and asked her in one voice whether she wanted to go back to the village home. Their question returned with a thudding silence, and that is when they realized that with her closed eyes and calm face, their mother looked a lot like an idol. They touched her feet and wept in folded hands, while John Mansfield's words hovered over them: "In the dark womb where I began/ My mother's life made me a man/Through all the months of human birth/Her beauty fed my common earth/I cannot see, nor breathe, nor stir/But through the death of some of her."

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

### CROSS TALK

**They all bent upon their mother, and asked her in one voice whether she wanted to go back to the village home. Their question returned with a thudding silence, and that is when they realized that with her closed eyes and calm face, their mother looked a lot like an idol. They touched her feet and wept in folded hands, while John Mansfield's words hovered over them: "In the dark womb where I began/ My mother's life made me a man/Through all the months of human birth/Her beauty fed my common earth/I cannot see, nor breathe, nor stir/But through the death of some of her."**

impervious to everything. She no longer responds to endearing calls, and does not tell what is her wish. They want to bring her favorite food, the fruit she loved, the soup she admired, the curry she relished. They watch her twitch, and gasp for breath, her right hand occasionally tugging at the tube that runs through her nose. A mother she was until these tubes turned her into a science fiction thing wired to life-supporting gadgets.

Thus the source of eight lives herself is dying as though the tubes attached to her are umbilical chords connected to a reverse

But nothing happens as though the soul entombed in the grievous silence had lost its porosity.

Still the doctors have asked them not to show any emotions in front of their mother lest it intensified the storm already brewing inside her. She could still hear everything, and could be stirred by what she heard. Her mind, the doctors explained, had become a prisoner of her body. It was like music muffled within the layers of flesh, which played loud and redolent within her consciousness without reaching others.

When more than one of her children gather at a time, they get

another life, which is the essence of real human love that feels the presence of the cherished child even in the debased, degraded man. The youngest son of this dying mother wonders if that still holds good for his mother whom he had once thrown out of her living quarters and forced to live in the kitchen for many days. She never spoke with him since then, and now the son regrets his behavior.

Others tell him he was late. It does not matter where she dies now because she would hardly know the difference. They take him to task for ill-treating his mother under whose feet lay his heaven.

pain, gives courage, administers hope, diminishes grief, and induces sleep. It dispels darkness and holds off spirits. It brings solace in sorrow and shade in scorching heat.

The sisters sob because they could not do enough for their mother, their lives given to other men's whims. They are not sure how their brothers would treat them once the mother was gone. Where would they go in despair and sorrow, and who would they turn to for consolation and comfort? The limp and languid body that still pulsates with faint activities of life is the last relic of their own beginning. Now

### OPINION

## Critical times for Bangladesh and South Asia

DR KAMAL HOSSAIN

IT is almost fifty days since the newly elected government took office. Some may say it is too early to assess the performance of the new government: that it is too early to expect results. On the other hand, it is important for people to express their serious concerns when their basic expectations for improvement in key areas such as law and order, effective action against mafians, moving towards a terror free environment in educational institutions, reducing political tensions and promoting an atmosphere conducive to the working of parliamentary democracy are not addressed. Surely these expectations were not unreasonable. Yet we cannot but express our deep worries at the prevailing situation.

While some of the godfathers

are no longer on the scene, new godfathers seem to be emerging. Patterns of terrorization and extortion, from which people expected to be relieved, have not changed. The only difference is that old areas of extortion such as bus terminals have now been captured by new godfathers and their musclemen, while tenders floated by different ministries are being grabbed by different party cadres. In some cases musclemen who operated under the umbrella of the previous regime have switched allegiance.

Terrorism and black money have posed the major threat to citizens' security and participation. The impunity of armed cadres has encouraged violent attacks on political opponents and vulnerable communities. Their violent assaults are reported daily despite the proclaimed programmes for recov-

ery of arms. These trends are a threat to stability and democracy.

If the government is serious about its claim to address the issue of terrorism and violence, it must be seen to act against armed cadres, whose photographs are appearing daily in the newspapers. Public confidence can be built only by effective law enforcement, promoting an environment of political tolerance, and avoiding partisan decisions. The tendency to reduce the administration and law enforcing agencies into party instruments must be resisted. The state machinery and the law enforcing agencies must act in the national interest in accordance with the law and the constitution and not be used to serve the interests of any party.

These are critical times for Bangladesh, as for other countries in South Asia. We have all been

seriously affected by global economic developments as well as developments in the region. It is all the more reason to move away from the path of political confrontation, and use of repressive laws.

It is high time we learnt lessons from our past experience. Confrontational politics, violent assaults on political opponents, absence of respect and tolerance for dissent have undermined democracy and development in Bangladesh for decades. They have also contributed to misgovernance. We need to move away from this past and work towards an environment for democratic participation.

The government has a prime responsibility to protect its citizens and this responsibility cannot be waived away by dismissing reports of post election violence as sensa-

tional, irresponsible or exaggerated. It is the constitutional responsibility of the government to ensure equal protection of the law to all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation. The cases reported in the press and which have been confirmed by on site fact finding leave no doubt that there have been criminal assaults in different parts of the country on members of the minority community, including the women. These reports call for immediate investigation and exemplary action against those responsible. It is only such action that would establish the credibility of the government's pledge to create a terror free society. Proper independent investigation only could provide a sense of security to those who have been victims of violence and at the same time expose any inaccuracies in reports.

A government elected by the people must have confidence in the citizens, and this can be done by sharing information and inviting public discussion and debate on major policy issues. Its proposals for gas export or other major policy directives must be disclosed in detail to the people, so as to promote a healthy debate on this vital subject both inside and outside Parliament.

The right to freedom of information is the basis for citizens' participation. This is an essential ingredient if we are to take bold initiatives in addressing critical areas such as education and energy, health and environment, political and communal harmony. Even a party enjoying a large majority needs all the more to build consensus on key national issues, by securing the support of all sections of the people.

As citizens we must once again emphasise that respect for the core values and ground rules of democracy tolerance and mutual respect for each other's rights is imperative. We need to call upon all democratic forces unitedly to nurture the values of democracy, pluralism and human rights.

People have expressed a clear national consensus on the urgent need to neutralize armed cadres and to end their reign of terror. Deterrent law enforcement measures must be seen to be implemented, against all those responsible for criminal assaults on the people, in particular on vulnerable members of the minority communities. Citizens attach the highest priority to the rule of law, in which law enforcement is impartial and effective. No criminal, regardless of party affiliation, can be seen to

enjoy impunity and remain above the law. Citizens must continue unitedly to press the government to take action against them. We must engage actively in cleaning our educational institutions of terrorism, of attacking corruption, of bringing about economic and administrative reforms and setting priorities for education and health which are in the interests of the people and not of narrow privileged groups. We must act together now to prevent bad practices and misgovernance. We must act to empower people so that we can realize our aspirations for a society in which people can live in peace and enjoy security of life and be protected by the rule of law.

Dr Kamal Hossain is the President of Gonoforum.