

Simi driven to suicide

It's a ringing indictment on our failure to protect the vulnerable

A final year student of the Narayanganj Institute of Fine Arts, Simi was gifted and enterprising, always keen to put her natural talent and acquired artistic skills to good use. She would occasionally do *alpana* (refined art-work with motif) for marriage ceremonies or festivals, and even try her hand in boutique print, all to supplement her family's meagre income.

She felt it was her birth right as a citizen of a free and democratic country, whose Constitution pledges equality of all citizens to exercise her personal freedom of movement and that of self-advancement. To the hoodlums and their associates, steeped in male egomania, she was pushing the borders of their itchy patience rather than the frontiers of progress for herself.

Her fault was her confident, buoyant footsteps as she trekked home from work through a passage by which stood a bunch of do-nothing youngmen to hurl abuses at her. One day she slapped one of her tormentors and things took an ugly turn then on. The goon filed an FIR against her with the Khilgaon police station. Sub-inspector Bashar on a visit to Simi's residence allegedly misbehaved with the whole family rather than allaying their fears of a reprisal. In the process, Simi's sense of insecurity as a vulnerable member of the society went completely overlooked. There was even a *salish* (the so-called one sided trial) organised to deny her the personal freedom to build a stable future for her. She was inexorably driven to commit a suicide.

It has been a death for honour; let our conscience revolt now against a society punishing the weak and letting goons off the hook.

Our sincere thanks to Home Minister Altaf Hossain who visited the aggrieved family and took a drastic action against police officer Abul Bashar by having him arrested and okaying legal action against him. We want the culprits caught, too, and eventually convicted for forcing Simi to take her life.

All this has been a fresh pointer to the oppression of the weak, especially of the women, in the hands of hoodlums abetted by the police. It is high time the civil society launched a social movement for the protection of the vulnerable segments of the society, particularly women against whom the attacks have been persistent as a flagrant violation of human rights.

Delivering baby near a DMC drain!

Clinic pirates snatching mothers to make money

HAD Halima Begum of Gazipur known earlier she might well have chosen to give birth at home. Feeling that this wasn't safe she came to the Dhaka Medical College on Saturday last. But she ended up delivering the child in public next to a drain while a curious crowd watched her being pulled in various directions by "ayahs" wanting her for admission into private clinics scattered nearby. This is an excellent reminder of the crisis in the formal health sector including the Medical College.

One should face the fact that the Dhaka Medical College (DMC) is primarily for the subaltern sick. Unless there is a critical situation -- injury or cardiac arrest related -- this place isn't visited by the able-to-afford class who visit finer city private clinics or go abroad for treatment. DMC is the address for the choicelless when seeking medical support. Naturally it's neglected.

People have also raised questions as to why the nearby police post didn't act while Halima was nearly being pulled apart. The chief of the Dhaka Medical College has also said that they had informed the police a number of times to take action against these patient-grabbers for private clinics but nothing had been done.

In all fairness, especially to the police, the situation is more complex than one sees in an immediate glance. Had the facilities in the DMC been sufficient, the question of alternate care centres albeit bad ones wouldn't have emerged. Had the patients known about the facilities closer to Gazipur for providing Emergency Obstetric Care, perhaps none would have travelled all the way to suffer all this. Had the health authorities been serious, there would have been more supervision of private clinics and their management. It's full of such unresolved puzzles and all this concerning emergency health care. The police comes only much later.

What happened to Halima Khatun is an indicator of a much bigger problem. What she experienced is partly a law and order problem and partly a health system problem. Both the police and the doctors are responsible and both need healing. Unfortunately such incidents have occurred before. Unfortunately they may occur again if history is any guide. Unless the health policies become pro-poor this type of incidents are here to stay.

Pax Americana unlimited?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

WHAT appeared to be a great tragedy in America's history on 11 September, 2001 later turned to be boon bringing about the nation's finest hour -- a distinction that America would not achieve even in 1945 when the country possessed half of the world's wealth and military strength. It could not do it during the euphoric years of the conquest of cold war in early 90s when Europe which asserted its separate identity and increasingly became defiant. Indeed up till 11 September most European media and many of its leaders were charging Washington with unilateralism and questioned the usefulness of common security in the post cold war world. A European Army was coming into being outside the NATO's framework. Russia, disgruntled over the question of missile defence, kept blowing hot and cold with its massive nuclear arsenal. China oscillated between cooperation and confrontation in its relationship with the US while Germany and Japan, two defeated nations of the World War II were coming out of the allies' shadows. A transatlantic solidarity under the US' aegis was far from reality.

The US' launching of war on terrorism in the aftermath of September 11 made them all fall in line with America just in a stroke. Europe's nagging grumble was overtaken by European offer to join the American diplomatic and military campaign against terrorism without a fudge. Tony Blair's 'mythical America' seemed rediscovered as he offered to fight 'shoulder to shoulder' with America in her hour of crisis. The most European countries including Germany which usually

among them. In fact, Europe has been made sufficiently aware of its vulnerability either to the terrorists or to the United States in the event of its noncompliance of the latter's dictates. Vladimir Putin, after years of wandering in wilderness concluded that to play a major international role Russia has to willy nilly play up with the United States. China's experience is not much dissimilar. She too painfully arrived at the conclusion that for her crucial growth and reforms in a sustained

assault on America and the retaliation it provoked convincingly brought home a realisation that no other power could possibly strike back so effectively and decisively and just how important was still America's role in dealing with such crisis. September 11 also led to the realisation that Europe was still without means of retaliation against similar attack and hence there was a need for a common transatlantic security relationship under US' leadership. The realisation was so

The old, decrepit, inept and 'corrupt' Arab-Palestinian leaders may be impressed and covered by US-Israeli military might but the Hamas and Islamic Jihad's suicide squads are not. "One is willing to die because someone won't let you live" appears to be the message conveyed by the suicide missions while inflicting maximum damage to the adversary. How would America deal with them in its global effort to root out terrorism? The cutting edge of all its power, wisdom and strate-

since they had no place to go. Some of the Pushtuns and most of Pakistani Taliban must have entered Pakistan and disappeared in the Afghan refugee camps or in the tribal population. If any significant number of them were able to join hands with like minded men either in Afghanistan or Pakistan their reconsolidation will only be the matter of time. The name may change but the movement will probably persist and the Taliban as a political force will be difficult to annihilate as long as the fundamentalism remains a factor of faith.

Then the anger and desperation generated by American military action either in Afghanistan or elsewhere are potent weapons to strike back. The instinct for survival of the people so grossly wronged cannot but devise new dynamics even for their sheer existence. According to Naom Chomsky, the dissident intellectual from the MIT, Washington's military campaign in Afghanistan is itself an act of terrorism which it carried out disregarding the international law and morality. Coming from a scholar of Chomsky's stature the observation lends substance to what many people in our part of the world have believed for quite some time now. The planet will indeed be poor unless there is resistance to such brazen interventions from the world's self-styled moral arbiter. Therefore, the people wronged across the world will instinctively build their defence in tandem with the growing power of the West. And the wave of Pax Americana witnessed to day is perhaps not unlimited; neither it is *ad infinitum*.

Bing (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BLISS.

PERSPECTIVES

According to Naom Chomsky, the dissident intellectual from the MIT, Washington's military campaign in Afghanistan is itself an act of terrorism which it carried out disregarding the international law and morality. Coming from a scholar of Chomsky's stature the observation lends substance to what many people in our part of the world have believed for quite some time now. The planet will indeed be poor unless there is resistance to such brazen interventions from the world's self-styled moral arbiter.

put up the excuse of 'domestic constraints' on similar situations offered to 'join the coalition against terrorism' by sending troops beyond NATO's boundaries. Russia became a zealous partner in the US' anti-terrorism campaign while China, after initial wavering, provided vital intelligence. Despite Pakistan's role as frontline ally of the US, India also drew closer to America. Even a hostile Iran softened her anti-US stance.

None of these developments was conceivable before September 11 the windfall of which made it all possible. It does not mean that there has been, by any chance, a congruence of interest between these countries and the United States. Neither is there willing cooperation

manner China needed to shun tense relation with America. Caught between the terrorists' invisible hand and a threat of American retaliation the nations around the world had indeed gone jitter. Look at the servile manner in which they competed with each other in currying US' favour.

For the first time in last half a century America faces no strategic adversary. There is none either in making in the foreseeable future. Even among the major powers none perceives a strategic threat from each other. However the danger looms. The danger for all of them now comes not from across the national frontiers but from the terrorists' cells implanted within the boundary of those countries. The

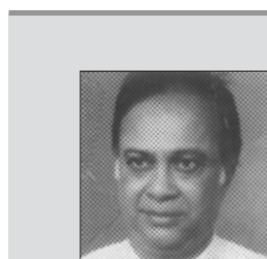
instinctive that within 48 hours of the terrorist attack, the NATO council, for the first time in NATO's existence, invoked Article 5 of the NATO treaty authorising collective self defence. Today the words of Bush wrong or right are sacrosanct and few have courage to defy them.

But even as the Americans pulverised Afghanistan with an unprecedented fury and brought the intrepid Taliban to their heels the small bands of 'terrorists' in the West Bank and Gaza remained undeterred, undaunted. They fight back the Israeli occupation, albeit a full scale war against them with stones and suicide bombs. Neither Israel's tank, gunship or F-16 nor the awe-inspiring power of the US, its supporter, could dampen their spirit.

gic ideas is blunted by the simple argument of conviction held by these fearless fighters. The lethality of huge American arsenal with its 'revolution' in military hardware does debilitate or devastate a country physically but it can seldom destroy or even influence the soul or spirit of a people.

True the Taliban were thoroughly routed by American bombing and rival Afghan tribes, but have they really gone into the limbo of history? Some of the Taliban were surely killed by the hostile militias, disaffected local people and the allies', aerial actions as they retreated to the places of safety. Unless they had become fluent in local dialects the Arab Taliban would face even greater hazards

Challenges before new Afghan government



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

AFGHAN situation remains at the top of the world news along with the Middle East situation. The embattled nation is cynosure of all eyes even though a bloody chapter appears to be now over with the installation of a new interim government in the country. Afghan crisis triggered by the massive terrorism in the United States and subsequent actions by Washington to eliminate those considered as sources of this terrorism hogged headlines across the world for more than two months. The American-aided Northern Alliance's advance and the intense bombing by the US planes to crush the Taleban regime in Afghanistan and the main suspect of the terrorism in the US Osama Bin Laden whom the Taleban gave shelter, was the main focus of world affairs amidst an exacerbation of the political situation in the areas surrounding Afghanistan. Now curtain was pulled down on one chapter of the Afghan tangle as a new interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai has taken over there following the victory of the US-led anti-terrorism coalition with a vow to rebuild the war-ravaged country.

The march to the victory as well as agreement on the formation of a government for six months with all the important factions of Afghan scenario was a difficult exercise. The US and some other western powers brokered the United Nations sponsored talks in Bonn where after intense and delicate discussions for several days the agreement on the present nature of the administration was made possible. Accordingly, the government of Hamid Karzai is now at the helm and now all eyes are set on the matter

how this government fares and whether the country which has been afflicted for last nearly three decades with a bloody infighting would now finally see stability. No doubt, the Indo-Pak tensions which appear to be exacerbating with the passing of each day, unless reversed unlikely, is currently the focus of regional developments. However, this development too has in a way come as a fallout of the Afghan situation where denouement is over but the final chapter is

of the Afghan scenario. Besides, the Islamic militants in Indian Kashmir opposing New Delhi's rule were known to be close to the religious Taleban regime in Afghanistan. Hence, India has big stake in the Afghan situation both in pre and post Taleban period.

As soon as the Afghan scene began to take turn following the September 11 bombings in the United States, both India and Pakistan kept a close watch on the developing situation with New Delhi

troops by former Soviet Union into the country in the aid of the leftist government in 1979 and their eventual disparture after long ten years did little to bring stability in Afghanistan. On the contrary, the presence of foreign troops brought the anti-leftist forces on common platform, who, however, got bogged down in infighting following the formation of the non-left government after the victory of the "Mujahideen" supported by the US and other western countries. This situation too was

problem in running the administration. The government needs to assuage their feelings by taking steps that should enhance their confidence in this administration. Many of them are expected to have a soft corner for the ousted Taleban and the government's repressive measures against those dislodged should come to a halt for the sake of forging greater national unity.

Some main portfolios in the government like defence and foreign affairs have gone to the Tajiks

interim government is under external pressures in running the administration. Once the prime objective of freeing the country from the hardliners has been achieved, the Afghans now be allowed to carry out their task without much dictates. Otherwise, new sentiments may arise replacing the favourable attitude towards foreign powers.

It is also necessary to provide humane touch by the foreigners as well as the interim government in dealing with the people regardless of supporters of Taleban or others. Because the massacre of the prisoners in the Mazar-e-Sharif following their surrender in Kunduz and other areas has given rise to allegations of human rights violations not only among the Afghan people but also among sections of people abroad. The new government needs to be circumspect in tackling with the neighbours like Pakistan and Iran as well as India and the central Asian nations without giving the idea that it is veering too much towards any particular country. Independent

approach as far as possible will help the administration revive the sovereign image that once existed long time before.

The country will have no problem in receiving international assistance for reconstruction but big powers may now adopt varying approaches towards this country. Russia supported the anti-Taleban drive by the US-led forces but may now be wary about American policies in the region. Moscow may look askance at the "designs" of the Washington while another big country China

may have reasons to watch closely the present changes in the regional situation. The internal conditions and external parameters, particularly attitudes of big powers, are two issues that the new Afghan administration needs to tackle carefully. It enjoys enormous goodwill but it remains to be seen if the Karzai administration can turn the situation for the good and welfare of vast multitude of the hapless Afghan people who have only seen pain and blood for more than two decades.

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MATTERS AROUND US

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intertwined with the success of Karzai administration and the prime concern if the war-ridden nation would eventually see the light at the end of the tunnel?

Afghanistan is not exactly a South Asian nation as it is considered to be in Central Asia. But its relations with South Asia is so deep that once this country and Myanmar were the proposed potential new inclusions in the SAARC, which began with seven regional countries and remains so till now, however with little likelihood of any expansion in the near future. When the international focus shifted to Afghanistan following the American resolve to take on the Taleban regime and Osama Bin Laden, obviously south Asia emerged as key region to be watched since two regional countries -- Pakistan and India -- are somewhat inextricably linked with the Afghan crisis. Pakistan, of course, is the central country among the neighbours of Afghanistan and is inseparably linked with its history in a way regardless of Afghan affairs being favourable or hostile to it. India, as a regional big country, its not much away from that country but its concern and interest are obviously paramount as its arch rival Pakistan is often at the centre stage

and Islamabad seeking to take the situation in their favour in one hand and derive advantages from it on the other. The American measures leading to Afghanistan crisis this time was so much concerned with the south Asia that even countries like Bangladesh and Nepal were also consulted by Washington for necessary assistance like facilities of over flight and air bases in the event of necessity in the war against terrorism meaning fight against the Taleban and hunt for Osama Bin Laden. However, these facilities were not availed of by the United States although countries concerned agreed to such requests.

Challenges before the new Afghan government are manifold. The prime objective of these challenges is to provide the country a political stability devoid of intermittent infighting. Everside the toppling of King Zahir Shah in 1973 by his cousin and brother-in-law Mohammad Daoud, Afghanistan is in the quagmire of internal disputes which was accentuated by influences and interventions of foreign powers. The elevation of Hafizullah Amin, Nur Muhammad Taraki, Babak Karmal and Najibullah to bar in Kabul were influenced by external powers. The despatch of

changed as president Burhanuddin Rabbani failed to bring unity and cohesion among the constituents leading to taking over of power by the hardline religious Taleban. They were at the helm for five years and now they are on the run. Their supreme leader Mullah Omar's whereabouts along with that of Osama Bin Laden remain shrouded in mystery with some suspecting they are already dead and others considering them as fugitives.

Undoubtedly, the new Afghan government has embarked upon a daunting task while most of the world has best wishes for them. The administration made up by various factions -- mainly four groups -- may pose problems for the interim prime minister as they have varying approach towards running the country although they agreed on some basic broad principles. The majority of the Afghan people are the "posthuns" who are less represented in the new set-up. However, there is a reason for this since the Taleban were composed mostly of these "posthuns" and hence it is not unlikely that their representation may be scant in the post-Taleban phase. Still, the inadequate presence of this large ethnic group could create serious commotion and thus

and this has infuriated the Uzbek group whose key figure Abdur Rashid Dostum controlling the "Mazar-i-Sharif" area turned recalcitrant but was later persuaded to accept the post of deputy minister for defence. Such commotion is not unlikely in the present conditions given the divisive record of the Afghan history. Hamid Karzai need to tread a cautious and constructive course so that the ethnic feelings are well controlled without giving much scope to widen the differences.

The multi-national force led by Britain is now present in the country while Americans are already there. They all helped the Northern Alliance which has swept to power. However, the Afghans have a record of disliking for the foreigners which is amply reflected not only in their determined fight against the Soviets but also against others like the British-Raj. Already several tribal leaders warned that they would think twice to support the government if any more bombing is carried out in the country by the foreign planes. While presence of foreign troops is needed for some time in the fractious society, extreme caution has to be maintained to dispel impression that the

OPINION

Of polythene and Pintu

OMAR KHASRU

GOKHLE, during the British rule, once said, "What Bengal thinks today, the whole India thinks tomorrow." It was not so much an affirmation of the intellectual prowess or pioneering thought process of Bengalees; it was just to pacify and placate the approbation-hungry talkative slushy throng. It gave the Bengalees a fat head and a high brow superiority complex that still permeates today. So while many Indian ethnic groups have made major strides, Bengalees have been bogged down in the same listless quagmire, with the sole exception of the glorious freedom struggle, a proud big bang in an otherwise moribund history.

California, on the other hand, is the pioneering US State that initiated plenty of good changes, emulated by many. It introduced lead-free, sulfur reduced gasoline, catalytic converter for vehicles many years ago. The state introduced a myriad of other environmentally sound practices, which has made it a model for anti pollution laws. Berkeley, the city where the reputable campus of University of California is located, banned the use of Styrofoam cups and containers, used mainly in fast

food places, and polythene bags in the late 1980s. After some hullabaloo and brouhaha from the restaurant industry, super markets and vested quarters, things settled down. Paper cups and plates, and paper bags took the place of harmful Styrofoam and polythene counterparts. And that was the end of that.

We are often swift and fleet footed to chastise and condemn the government for a plethora of misdeeds and missteps. And God knows there are plenty to censure and castigate the government about. We must then occasionally laud it for salutary step it occasionally but rarely takes. The banning of polythene bags, effective from January 1 in Dhaka and end of February in the rest of the country is one such laudable step, only if it is carried out meaningfully and stringently. Some say the decision has been made hastily without rehabilitation of the displaced workers. The fact is this prompt decision needed to be taken with a short notice and in a whirlwind fashion so that strong lobbies and vested interests could not thwart this action of immense public benefit. New Delhi, for example, banned diesel powered and leaded gasoline driven vehicles playing its streets with a week's notice. There was a huge hue and

cried and noisy demonstrations from the affected groups. But all soon quieted down.

The millions of polythene bags clog sewer lines and drainage system, cause water logging and result in serious harm to us, fish and other living beings. You look around you in all low lying and marshy land and you will see millions of these unseemly bags floating or lying around as an eyesore but more so as health hazard to most living things, perhaps with the exception of mosquitoes. To paraphrase a famous adage 'the proof is in the pudding.' The sincerity of the government edict will be tested not only in the implementation of the decision but also in the clean up of the millions of these harmful black bags out in the open and clogging the waterways and drainage, and subsequent follow up. One way of providing meaningful employment to the displaced workers may be to form clean up crews from amongst them. That ought to keep them busy for quite some time.

The banning of the use of polythene bags must necessarily be looked at as a small, albeit significant, first tiptoe step in mitigating the environmental disaster and degradation that we confront everyday. These are especially harmful to the

children. The logical next step has to be the banning of diesel engines, leaded gasoline and higher carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide emission vehicles, many of which ply the streets to make Dhaka the most polluted city in the world. Even worse than Mexico City, nicknamed the 'gas chamber' for the profusion of pollution. The problem may be the tempo and baby taxi crowd, the unfit trucks' and buses' owners and unions have a lot of political clout and thunder. It will be interesting to see if the government can overcome these pressure groups and take another sorely needed, environment friendly, people-benefit-oriented step, overcoming the powerful and influential lobbies and vested interests.

Speaking of harmful objects and things needing mandatory prohibition, the double dose of relief and good news this week has been the nabbing of Pintu, the notorious ruling party MP. He had allegedly assumed the mantle of Hazari, Shamim Osman, and other godfathers of the erstwhile ruling party and the previous regime. This gentleman, father of two with student days long behind him and at best a distant misty memory, was until recently the chairman of the central committee of the student wing, affiliated with the

ruling BNP. This committee was so notorious, and their activities and criminal enterprises so insidious and outrageous, the body was recently disbanded. That, unfortunately, was at best a cosmetic and symbolic step. The rampant extortion, terrorism and criminal activities of the cadres of the student group went unabated. One can only hope that the exemplary arrest of Pintu is a very first step of an intensive, organized and intensified action against his followers and other criminal and contemptible terrorists and their godfathers. The hope and the prayer is that this will not be a pipe dream and wishful musing of a deluded Pollyanna mind. The hope also is the other shoe is not about to drop and the government, after taking two good steps, does not behave like the proverbial monkey in the math book, climbing the oily pole two meters in one minute and slipping down a meter and a half the next.

Ignoring the condescending comment of Gokhle, let us be a little more proactive and action oriented and little less prone to ponderous, lazy, hazy, ineffectual, intellectual high thought. For the good of the people, less pollution and good governance.

The minority issue

MOHAMMAD A. ZAMAN, M.D.

writes from Raleigh, NC, USA.

A COMMENT: I grew up in a small village in Sylhet, half of which was Hindu. I played with them. I grew up with them. I made friends with them. As I went to college, some of my best friends were Hindus. Durga and Saraswati Puja was just like any other festival to me. But the recent events in Bangladesh as reported by The Daily Star and other newspapers is profoundly disturbing. It is even more disturbing to see the reluctance of our elected government to accept the problem as it exists. Smart solution requires identification of the problem and understanding its intricacies. Without the willingness to accept the problem as a problem, establishing a high profile government commission is nothing but a futile venture. To meet the criteria for general acceptance, the investigation has to be independent (of government) and transparent.

A FEW THOUGHTS: Even though we share a common cultural heritage, bonded tightly by a common language, a dichotomy got rooted with the introduction of Islam in Bengal. Probably most of the conversion in Islam occurred in

the downtrodden and oppressed "have-nots" in the lower strata of Hindu society (I bet my forefather was one of them). As they converted, they reaped the advantage of royal favors at the expense of their previous masters of higher strata. So a deep sense of untoward feeling between the two groups was there to begin with. And it is natural. Then came the British-Raj. With the loss of royal patronage, the Muslim society as a whole remained estranged, while the Hindu intelligentsia embraced English. It was a complete reversal of the dice. Economically prosperous, culturally advanced Hindu Babus looked down at the Muslim Mians. Thus, despite a very strong bondage, a deep-seated resentment permeated the Muslim psyche. In Bengal, this possibly got worsened during the Bango-Bhango movement. The point, I am alluding to is simple: "When economic and social parity supervenes, religion usually becomes a back-burner. The apparent ill feeling between the two groups of the same people, originated largely because of socio-economic reason. If the Hindu society was homogeneous to begin with, my forefather, most likely, would have

retained his Sonaton faith. And my name would have been predictably different." This deep-seated strain is not going to go away anytime soon. In fact, this dichotomy of our very culture, led to the evolution of two different tributaries of a great cultural might. It is like a twin, though not monozygotic. We have two different names. We look different like two fraternal brothers and/or sisters. But our Mother is the same.

If we consider this basic proposition as an established fact, a lot of apparent difference and inconsistencies can be explained without any misgivings. Being Arabic in origin, my name does not betray my cultural heritage. It only affirms the fact that I am flowing from a different tributary.

AN AFTERTHOUGHT: As I mentioned earlier, akin to a tectonic fault line, there is a natural strain in our national psyche. And some unscrupulous politicians are magnifying this strain with resultant atrocities of volcanic proportion against our own fraternal brothers and sisters. It is time to raise a rational voice that reverberates in every rational soul.