

## Repeal of Public Safety Act be welcomed

All other black laws should be repealed as well

THE Government has announced that it is taking steps to repeal the controversial and often misused Public Safety Act. As stated by the Law Minister, this will also mean that the cases pending under this Act will be automatically repealed too. This comes as a burst of sunshine on a slightly dismal year not too full of good tidings. It is great news for which full credit goes to the BNP government. The decision to do so is nothing short of an act of corporate political courage and integrity.

The Public Safety Act was passed by the Awami League in the year 2000 and was universally criticized when it was midwived into being. Unfortunately, the then Awami League government felt that the demerits of what was termed as a 'black law' far outweighed the advantage to be gained by having recourse to such an unfair internment Act. While AL did gain the right to rein in political and social opponents, it gained an image as a party not above using draconian laws in the name of protecting democracy. Now BNP has taken a significant step and if it does end up dismantling PSA, it will have marked a major step for which it is certain to reap benefits all around.

What BNP will also have done is keep an electoral promise, a feature certainly not common in Bangladeshi politics. It had declared that if voted to power it would abolish PSA and now that it is on the verge of doing so, we feel further encouraged. When parties don't hesitate to renege on promises -- like promising never to call hartals and then doing so as soon as the "need" arises -- diminish credibility of politics as a whole and that's why BNP's example is a pleasure to behold.

However, BNP can't stop here. It should treat the repealing of 'black laws' as a matter of process and kill all other laws including the Special Powers Act and its various legal siblings. If BNP can do that and public demand is that it should, history will remember the party with honour. BNP has a great opportunity to serve democracy. It must seize that.

## Right to get educated denied?

Admission crisis in Dhaka schools symptom of bigger problems

THE annual ritual of trying to get children admitted in Dhaka's more decent schools and becoming frustrated when one fails to do so is on. Meanwhile, the rich are buying their way to school for their wards with the power of money, the socially powerful are ensuring the entry with the clout of their position and the brawny ones are making sure that a good shout at the school authorities gets their chosen ones admitted.

The right to education should have been a basic one but it isn't in Bangladesh. Primary education is in a desperate shambles and even the enticement of food isn't enough in most cases. Children are either too poor or not motivated enough to come to school. In the areas outside Dhaka, where most study, there is not enough space in the schools to go and study. And where there is space, there is no quality education. Going to school isn't enough. One has to learn. That is rarely happening in Bangladeshi schools.

The situation is unfortunately no different in Dhaka. Compared to need, there are simply not enough quality schools. The rush is for those schools and after failing to get admitted children go for lesser and lesser versions till they land up in places where it might have been better to avoid to get admitted at all in the first place.

Yet ensuring a basic minimum standard of schools is the first responsibility of the education establishment. The fact that some schools are very good and most are not good at all means school supervision is non-existent and the government has failed to ensure quality education for children. Since children of the elite face no admission obstacle to study in the best schools and are already on a fast track to a foreign education, the decision makers aren't really bothered about this problem.

Fighter planes and frigates may protect us from enemies, real or imagined, but there are few weapons in our arsenal which can protect us from the fallout of poor education. Dhaka may house those who have become the wealthiest in our impoverished land but it also houses the largest army of would be ill educated. The misery of parents trying to get their children educated but failing is the finest metaphor to explain contemporary Bangladesh. It's a bleak statement but facts are stronger than forced optimism.

# Averting a ruinous war: What's the way out?

PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

NEW Delhi has upped the ante twice within a week by taking tough diplomatic measures against Pakistan. It is playing for extremely high stakes in this mounting confrontation.

The signs are that India has broadened its agenda and now wants "effective action" against a wide range of militant groups besides Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. A military confrontation now seems likely.

Nothing could be more undesirable in strategic, social, political and economic terms, or more unproductive in countering terrorism. A military attack on Pakistan, however limited, must be averted at all costs.

To say this is neither to minimise the gravity of December 13, nor ignore Islamabad's complicity in terrorist activities. Rather, the argument is that diplomatic options are more productive. It is India's duty to explore and exhaust them.

India's armed services chiefs oppose the use of military force. This is also the mood among a majority of retired generals and admirals.

The restraint they advocate contrasts sharply with the political leaders' sabre-rattling. In fact, India may be witnessing the first disconnect in perceptions between its political and military leaders. Even when Gen Manekshaw in early 1971 refused to prematurely attack

Pakistani troops in Bangladesh, he disagreed with Indira Gandhi not over military strategy, only the timing.

The services chiefs believe that attacks on Pakistani territory will yield poor results. They lack accurate information on the location of such few "training camps" as remain after most were shifted deep into Pakistan.

Given information constraints,

retaliation. Gen Musharraf cannot afford to be seen cowering down to India. After the Taliban's defeat and collapse of Islamabad's quarter-century-old Afghanistan polity, he has no option but to hit back hard. Already, he is under flak for "selling out" to the Americans. A protracted war will all but destroy Pakistan's fragile economy and set back India's by many years. Besides, the war could escalate into a suicidal

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harsher measure, beyond banning PIA overflights and reducing their two diplomatic mission's staff strength by 50 percent, it will erode its own diplomatic leverage in Pakistan and breed more resentment.

This won't encourage moderate, reasonable, conduct on Islamabad's part. For Pakistanis who stand for moderation, India will appear bloody-minded and unrea-

Resolution 1373, mandating anti-terrorist action by all states on pain of sanctions.

This will generate pressure on Gen Musharraf to take effective, verifiable measures, including the arrest of extremist leaders, clampdown on their facilities and assets, and destruction of their ISI links. A good diplomatic initiative will help India retain the support of the international community and coerce Gen Musharraf into eradicating a menace for which Pakistan has paid heavily.

This will also help New Delhi build upon the present favourable situation in Kashmir. The Taliban's defeat has had a huge impact there. This creates a big opening to revitalise the political process and get the All-Party Hurriyat Conference to participate in the next Assembly elections.

War will close that opening. Good diplomacy will expand it and create conditions in which terrorism gets discredited and foreign militants get isolated.

For this to happen, the government must abandon its military-adventurist approach. Centrist parties like the Congress, Samajwadi, and the NDA's "secular" components must push it away from that course.

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Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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high-altitude air strikes will be largely ineffective. Low-flying planes will be vulnerable. Most suspect camps are beyond artillery range.

Even pro-active ground attacks and "hot pursuit" will claim high casualties. "Hot pursuit" over land, as distinct from the sea, is legally problematic. Any ground-troops operation will escalate into a full war. India's military options against Pakistan are limited, even ineffectual. There can be no "limited war" between the two. Given their relative strategic parity, any confrontation will last several weeks. An Indian attack will certainly draw

nuclear conflagration.

What will New Delhi achieve even if, short of a nuclear holocaust, it "wins" the war? Gen Musharraf will fall and Pakistan would disintegrate on India's borders. That would be catastrophic for both societies.

By embarking on confrontation, New Delhi will push Pakistan's extremists further down the terrorist path and encourage irresponsible conduct on the government's part. This would be self-defeating. One cardinal lesson of September 11 is that all states are vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

Tragically, India's rulers are stoking the fires of war. Their moti-

was an amateurish operation by militants acting independently of Gen Musharraf. Even if some rogue ISI elements were behind it, a military confrontation would only strengthen them.

The Vajpayee government is under internal Right-wing pressure. On December 20, Mr Vajpayee was grilled for two hours by Uttar Pradesh chief minister Rajnath Singh and BJP-RSS hardliners. They told him the BJP would lose heavily in the coming UP elections unless India launches military strikes on Pakistan. If the BJP loses UP, the NDA could itself collapse.

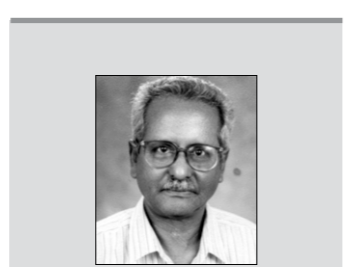
If India now takes some more

reasonable. Thus India will weaken its own support-base. India is even considering abrogating the Indus Waters Treaty, under which the two countries share the waters of six rivers in the Indus Basin.

This would be tantamount to laying economic siege to Pakistan, which is impermissible under international law. (India once almost invited Security Council sanctions for choking off the flow of the Ganges to Bangladesh at Farakka).

There is a rational, cool-headed, low-risk alternative to such high-handed measures and to war. India should take the terrorism issue to the Security Council and invoke

# India and Pakistan should start talking again



M.J. ZAHEDI

India's anger resembles the outburst of emotion after the Sept. 11 attacks in America. But the difference is that New Delhi does not seem to understand that it is simply not possible to 'eliminate' or 'liquidate' a neighbour with nuclear weapons, as some extremists there are suggesting. Indians don't seem to realize that ill-considered warlike actions by it against Pakistan could take the focus away from the global

seems to be creating war hysteria instead. Its actions, ranging from withdrawal of its envoy from Pakistan to forward movement of troops along the Pakistan border, speak of a desire to seek a military, rather than a political, solution to the current dispute. No willingness in New Delhi can be seen to address the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir.

The leadership in New Delhi

Jammu and Kashmir, both with the people of the state, which she is occupying, as also with Pakistan. Why not do it now, so that a comprehensive solution to South Asia's security problems can be found, all analysts of the present situation say. The papers have praised Pakistan's affirmation that it would never use nuclear weapons. *The Nation* said the Pakistan position should send the right message to the 'worried

politically flexible as he is firm and single minded. India should expect more from talking to him than from threatening him. Pakistan has already taken some action; it has frozen the assets of two groups blamed by India for the December 13 attack on its parliament and has placed the leader of one group under house arrest. But by aggressively demanding action against such groups, India is actually making it more difficult for Pakistan to move against them without seeming to act under duress, said a *Dawn* editorial. The Indians should take a hard look at the consequences of their actions.

Seeing Pakistan as a frontline state against terrorism, India is doubly distressed because it has invested about ten years in getting Pakistan declared a terrorist state. But it now finds that the world community has different ideas and is rather appreciative of the role that Pakistan has played in combating terrorism.

The world should remember that so long as the Kashmir dispute remains unresolved, chances for peace between India and Pakistan, indeed in the region, will remain slim. With billions of lives at stake, the onus is on the world powers, especially America, to see that all sides start talking again.

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## LETTER FROM KARACHI

Seeing Pakistan as a frontline state against terrorism, India is doubly distressed because it has invested about ten years in getting Pakistan declared a terrorist state. But it now finds that the world community has different ideas and is rather appreciative of the role that Pakistan has played in combating terrorism. The world should remember that so long as the Kashmir dispute remains unresolved, chances for peace between India and Pakistan, indeed in the region, will remain slim.

war against terrorism. It could even, as a writer in *The Nation* thinks, even give a boost to the militants in Pakistan, who now face rather adverse circumstances at the hands of Gen. Musharraf's government. The papers have advocated that both India and Pakistan address the root causes of violence between the two countries. The US should persuade India to get serious about resolving the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir. But India's leadership

seems oblivious to the fact that even after the current militancy is brought under control, India will continue to have a Kashmir problem. They do not seem to accept the fact that people unwilling to remain under the rule of another power cannot be subjugated by force of arms alone. From South Africa to Palestine the lesson of recent history is that a people seeking freedom cannot be repressed forever. Sooner or later India will have to discuss the future of

world'. It should increase, a *The News* editorial said, increase diplomatic pressure on India to step back from 'a catastrophe'. It also referred to the reaction of the rest of the world that is urging restraint. They have said that both India and Pakistan should sit together and sort out their differences through negotiations.

China, a longtime friend of Pakistan, has urged the two countries to open talks and settle the conten-

peaceful ways of solving inter-state differences.

The Pakistan President Gen. Pervez Musharraf has always been saying, and he reiterated it only on Saturday, that he was ready for talks with the Indian Prime Minister when they both attend a SAARC meeting in Katmandu, provided of course there is a similar willingness also on the other side. As *The News* said, New Delhi needs to remember that President Musharraf is quite as

# Of economic diplomacy

M. SHAFIULLAH

Unfolding his vision the Foreign Minister recently stated that economic diplomacy would dominate the foreign policy of Bangladesh. Besides winning friends for Bangladesh, job of the Ambassadors would be to become salesmen to increase exports, procure foreign investment and employment for Bangladeshis abroad. In a nutshell these basic elements constitute the economic diplomacy of Bangladesh. All Foreign Ministers before M. Morshed Khan harped on the same tune in varied emphasis. What distinguishes the new Foreign Minister is that he heads a successful business house, was special envoy of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia during 1991-95 and chaired the Special Committee on Foreign Affairs which recommended extensive reform to tune the Ministry to modern time. He is now in saddle to take the horse to drink. Trained in the Japanese school of entrepreneurship Morshed Khan has the insight how Tokyo developed economic diplomacy to transform the country into powerhouse of enormous influence without being a military power. He would be rated a successful Foreign Minister if he can generate a minimum of Japanese economic diplomacy in Bangladesh Foreign Office and Missions abroad.

Foreign Minister asked the

Ambassadors to act as salesmen but did not mention to turn Embassies into showroom of Bangladesh products. There are instances where with a bit of initiative and imagination and support of the Export Promotion Bureau Embassies became windows of Bangladesh exportables. Where direct participation of home entrepreneurs in international fairs was not feasible the Mission with the samples of the display centre had taken part to introduce range of items to foreign buyers. Field experience tells us whereas our neighbours are responding to demand of market forces we offer a sort of take it or leave it option. In this context an experience in North African countries is instructive. Traditionally Arabs enjoy strong liquor tea. Even in desert after pitching tent the first thing an Arab will do is to lit fire to cook his tea. A huge quantity of tea is imported from abroad. Although Sri Lanka tea is a favourite the importing government agency assured Bangladesh Ambassador a share of market provided Bangladesh supplied the same quality of tea as that of Sri Lanka or India. Thinking that his initiative might work the ambassador procured a number of tea packets of Sri Lanka, Indian and Kenyan origin from market and sent to famous tea houses like James Finlay, HRC, Ispahani and a few others here to compare with Bangladesh tea and to confirm whether they could sup-

ply the same quality in volume. Reply was sharp which, however, dampened the enthusiasm of the Ambassador. Bangladesh gardens mostly produce CTC variety but the Arab markets demand leaf tea or the orthodox variety. The incident is mentioned just to bring home the fact that our competitors diversified their product to retain markets and have comparative advantage over our single variety.

The necessity to diversify Bangladesh export base was even underscored on 20 November last by European Commission Director for Asia in the context of ready made garments (RMG). In the bilateral EU-Bangladesh meeting he emphasized that Bangladesh diversify its export base, reduce dependence on ready made garments and look for items where rules of origin do not apply. In other words advice was offered not to keep all eggs in one basket in the light of adverse effect on global trade following 11th September attack on USA. The world wide campaign of the environmentalists to discourage use of synthetic material may have a favourable effect on the recovery of jute market. Jute bags are extensively used in the north African countries like Libya and Tunisia for storage and movement of wheat and corn. In a good harvest year Libya procure about five million and Tunisia six million pieces of jute bags. They generally meet their requirement through intermediary source in Europe. The

ambassador's effort to sell Bangladesh jute bag directly to government was not, however, without being brought with irony. Negotiation with Libya was conducted in close liaison with BJMC. When the deal for three million pieces was almost through BJMC found it difficult to accept Swiss Franc as mode of payment while Libya was unable to pay in US dollar since Tripoli stopped official transaction in US currency in the absence of diplomatic relation between the two countries.

The debate in economic diplomacy for the ambassador did not end with this episode, he had another cup of bitter taste in his pursuit to sell jute bag to Tunisia. His cultivation of high officials in the Tunisian Office Des Cereales helped him to obtain assurance that about five million jute bags would be sourced from Bangladesh although recent directive required floating of tender to meet technical formality. The tender document was in French and gist was forwarded to BJMC with request to submit the document. BJMC advised the ambassador who was resident in Tripoli that its European office in Brussels would submit the tender and take all follow up action. On subsequent query with the Office Des Cereales it was revealed that BJMC, Brussels office did submit tender but a Brussels based company won the tender beating Bangladesh by mere 50 cent per 100 bags in the negotiation that followed after opening of

tender. The Jute Minister in mid November last year said that with at least 50 years old machinery mills were running at a very low capacity and were unable to accept new order. Replacement of old units with the latest equipment was on hold due to lack of fund. Bad news for Economic Diplomacy! If mills cannot produce what the ambassadors will sell?

The World Bank South Asian region Vice-President made plain observation on 22 November in Dhaka that WB would stop funding loss-making state owned enterprises and strongly advised for privatization. The jute sector is the second highest foreign exchange earning entity and the largest employer. The Jute Minister may only bid farewell to parties at public expense and rein in mass entertainment of elitist establishments of the government to save money to upgrade the mills to sustain economy. His effort will fit in the framework of World Bank vice-president who asked the Finance Minister to stop wasteful public expenditure to qualify for loan. The writer attended observance of red letter days of some of our donor countries in prayer at the principal church and concert in national theatre with no refreshment served at the public expense to keep the public expenditure at the minimum. Money thus saved goes to the fund for development assistance programme to third world countries like Bangladesh.

The representatives of the donor countries in Dhaka mock at our extravaganza with borrowed money.

Bangladesh wage earners abroad and their average annual two billion dollar remittance is the most important element of economic diplomacy. Unfortunately the golden goose has been under threat of being slaughtered at the hand of a section of greedy recruiting agents and their unholy collaborators in the government sectors. It calls for immediate intervention. Strict compliance of the existing recruitment rules together with amalgamation of Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) and Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL) into a single entity under Department of Overseas Bangladeshis to monitor market, rein in unscrupulous recruiting agents, produce semi-skilled and skilled workers and look after welfare of the wage earners brook no further delay to retain overseas employment. Bangladesh economic diplomacy may begin at home with convening meeting of Labour Attaches, Economic and Commercial officers and Ambassadors in the ten manpower importing countries to take stock of field situation.

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## OPINION

# Purdah and Islam

M MASUD ISA

For the last few days I have been reading in your esteemed daily differing views on the issue of Purdah. Nowhere in the Quran Allah has intended to put women behind veils as some of our zealots are trying to preach. Let us see what is in the holy Quran regarding dress for men and women. The following verses, in the Quran, translated by Allama Yusuf Ali, have clearly spelled out the purpose of dress for the faithful:

1. "O ye children of Adam We have bestowed raiment Upon you to cover **Your shame**, as well as To be an **adornment** to you But the **raiment of righteousness** That is **the best**" (Sura Al Araf, Verse 26)  
2. "O children of Adam

**Wear your beautiful apparels At every time and place Of prayer, eat and drink** But waste not by excess For Allah loveth not the wasters". (Sura Al Araf, Verse 32).

Essentially, the main purpose of dress in Islam as per the Quran is to beautify the appearance and make oneself elegant. Covering shame or dressing with modesty and decency are integral parts of dress since the invention of dress or raiment. If a dress is not beautiful or does not uphold ones personality in an elegant manner, the dress is not as per what Allah has ordained in the Quran. Dress is something that continuously changes with the progress of society and civilization. The traits that are important as per the Quran are the ones of decency, beauty and modesty.

Let's see what Allah has ordained in Sura An Nur and Al Ahjab to which

Mr. Ziaul Huda from Uttara referred:

3. "And say to the believing women That they should **lower** their **gaze** and **guard** their **modesty**, that they Should not display their Adornment except **What is apparent** That they should Draw their **veils** over Their **bosom** and not display Their adornment except..." (Sura An Nur, Verse 31).  
4. O Prophet, tell Thy wives and daughters And the believing women That they should cast Their outer garments over Their persons (when out of door): That is **most convenient** That they should be known As such and **not molested** And Allah is oft forgiving And most merciful" (Sura Al Ahjab, verse 59)

Both the above verses, upheld the then prevailing dress and ordained the inclusion of decency, modesty, beauty, good appearance, protection of the women from the bad elements of the society and that so in the context of the then prevailing Arab culture and inhibitions and prejudices against the women. Please note that in Sura Al Ahjab the purpose of covering women has been circumstantial and have not been generalized. Both the male and female in the Arab and in the desert climate wear scarves and or head-dresses of some form. The dresses that evolved as part of their culture were greatly influenced by the climatic conditions of these regions.

In verse 30 of Sura An Nur Allah has also ordained the men to lower their gaze and guard their modesty. The emphasis in the above verses is to be seen with what have been said about the purpose of dress. It is very

important to note and understand that the entire Quran was revealed to a desert populace having very specific lifestyle, dress codes, social values and stigmas, superstitions, cultural heritage etc. The entire Arab peninsula and the regions around that had very specific dress codes for the male and females. Their dresses and social lives were greatly influenced by the Assyrian civilization. The Assyrian law (7th century BC) required veiling of women and forbade veiling of slaves and women of ill fame (ref: Cambridge Ancient History, 10, 107).

In the Quran Allah has cited examples, parables, incidents that were readily comprehensible to the Arabs and the people living in these areas. Even in the description of Garden/Heaven, the presence of rivers, cool shades of trees, fruits (that were known to the Arabs), tents and the articles of luxury and plea-

ures that the Arabs could think of in the then context, have been cited. This obviously, does not mean that Quran has no universal appeal these were done to make the examples, parables and the signs clear to that populace in whose language the Quran was revealed. The main messages that the Quran conveys are to encourage people to lead a righteous life, believe in one God, submit to His will, establish justice and respect for human life, protect orphans and the dependants, bring probity in all dealings and avoid all sorts of indecent acts.

Regarding dress, the verses that we find in the Quran have been very specific to emphasize on the elements of decency and beauty. Please note that Allah has not set any details of what to be seen or not to be seen of the men and women. In Verse 31 of Sura An Nur He did simply ask men and women to be

modest, cover the bosom of the women and not to show their beauty or adornment which exceeds the limit of decency and elegance. I think, everyone knows which is and which is not a decent and elegant dress. But more than this, Allah wants men and women to be righteous (the verse 26 of Sura Al Araf) and said it is more important to be righteous than to juggle with the niceties of dresses.

In an era of human rights, equality and opportunities for all, it is unfortunate that lot of us bring in issues that not only demean and misinterpret the intentions and the spirit in the Quran and make this great religion look oppressive, inflexible and intolerant but also make the women in the Muslim societies second class citizens with all the inhibitions in the name of religion. I was a witness to the woes and sufferings of the Afghan women when I visited that

country under the auspices of UNHCR in 1996. In the name of Purdah, the Talibans had effectively chained the women and closed off all the opportunities for them to explore their potentials and be on their own. The regressive and oppressive Talibans banned television, music, photos, education for the girls and effectively were pushing the society towards a medieval age with senseless cruelty and that so in the name of Islam!

I hope, the educated and the enlightened citizens would speak up to educate the zealots to shun their fanatic ways and not force one's own interpretation on others. Without aping the dress of some distant societies, let us creatively bring in decency in our own attitude and dress and also help the women look beautiful, elegant, dignified and decent and not put them behind the veils in the name of religion.