

Rewards to help catch big criminals bring none

The issue is of crime-fighting capacity not public incentives

THE announcement by the government of rewards for information leading to the arrest of top criminals of the country about a month back was quite an interesting one. Optimism was peeping in certain quarters that things finally could move towards positive directions. However, a month later, none of the terrorists seem to have been taken into custody and it really looks like the pessimists who had said that the authorities weren't serious about the business of curbing criminals were right. At least that's what it looks like on the day today.

The police authorities had really jazzed up the scene by declaring large rewards for information leading to the arrest of these top criminals. Of the listed 23, eight wore the price of Taka 1 lakh on their head while the rest were on a lesser level with Tk. 50,000 for the same. But no public has ventured forward it seems to claim the same and the criminals still seem to be happily hiding.

Given the clout the criminals have, especially the top-notch ones in Dhaka, it seems odd to expect the city's ordinary mortals to come forward and ensure a quick departure from life. So the chance of the already beleaguered citizen of Dhaka turning into a police informer is rather low.

Had the reward been announced as a monetary incentive for fellow criminals to turn in their colleagues in crime, the income of low level criminal too was grossly underestimated. The trade-off between financial enrichment and risk to life in this case is so absurd that this is no money to help police nab top class law breakers. This might interest the street criminal but he hardly has access to such big criminals.

Police are now saying that they have either left the city or even left the country. That being the case, one can see that all the *tamasha* of announcing rewards and media publicity was probably that: providing entertainment.

Our top order criminals have proven once again that they operate at a higher level than that of the police. We must first overhaul the police system and enable them to catch criminals. Right now, criminals seem more capable of breaking the law and getting away with it than the police who are supposed to protect it. But let's keep trying.

Girls victimised by early marriage

Women disempowered from the word 'go'

A UNICEF survey has been shockingly revelatory of the incidence of early marriage among girls, the mean average age being put at between 14 and 15 years. About five per cent of girls, even in the 10-14 age group, are married off, something of a body-blow to gender-based progress. But the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics puts the mean age at 18.3 years which is where we start with the disadvantage of a reduced recognition of the magnitude of the problem to address it properly.

The Bureau of Statistics data in a way tend to confirm the widely-held view that parents in the countryside overstate the age of their daughters to skirt the law on minimum age for their marriage, which is 18 years. This they are able to do because there is no registration of births. Thus it is absolutely imperative that the law requiring registration of births is enforced first, with teeth given to its content, where necessary, before we can think of enforcing the law on minimum marriageable age for girls.

What, however, will be key to remedying the situation is a strong political will on the part of the government of the day to apply the law of the land and the various international conventions on the rights of the child, the girl child in particular. Simultaneously, a campaign must be carried out to ensure a broad-based social awareness of the ills of early marriage such as, denial of normal adolescence, reproductive health and individuality so that the field is prepared for the elimination of child marriage.

So long as we fail to strategically link the cause for women's empowerment to that of removal of the bane of early marriage we will not succeed in either.

Musharraf's landmark speech: De-escalate right now!

PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

GENERAL PERVEZ Musharraf has done something heads of states don't do. He has subverted the ideological foundation which has sustained Pakistani politics for two decades. He has begun a major surgical operation on militant political Islam and launched an ambitious reform of society.

South Asia has never seen anything like this.

Gen Musharraf's January 12 address will be a landmark -- even as a catalogue of Pakistan's many ills and a list of intentions. But it is likely to be more than that thanks to Pakistan's biggest-ever crackdown on terrorists. Already, 2,000 suspects have been rounded up, five organisations including Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed banned, and 300 offices closed down.

Gen Musharraf's address was not a public relations exercise aimed at appeasing Western powers. More than two-thirds of it was devoted to diagnosing Pakistan's pathology and outlining an agenda for internal reform. Concessions on "external" issues like India's demand to surrender 20 terrorists were secondary.

Gen Musharraf plans to put Pakistan on the road to modernisation and secularisation by severing links between political Islam and the state, between the military and the

mullahs, and between Kashmir and terrorist violence. These links have had disastrous consequences for Pakistan. Whether the General succeeds or not, his plan represents the most ambitious reform undertaken outside Turkey to deal with the issue of religion and politics.

This reform represents a complete reversal of the Islamisation project launched by Zia-ul-Haq to acquire a figleaf of legitimacy for

lashed. *Jehadi* militants, inflamed by the Taliban's defeat, are only waiting, sharpening their claws.

Gen Musharraf has embarked on a bold and risky mission -- perhaps under pressure, even compulsion. But that should not detract from his purpose. Far-reaching changes sometimes happen because "soft" options vanish, and there is compulsion to change.

It would be sheer nitpicking to

interpretations of religion. He has clearly posed the choice between this future, and a grim fate if Pakistan chooses to be a closed, religion-obsessed, backward society.

Gen Musharraf asserts that Kashmir "runs through our blood". But he is careful to decouple Kashmir's "freedom struggle" from terrorist militancy and emphasise a negotiated solution. India must reciprocate this in good faith. It just

immediately de-escalate its military build-up. It would be ill-advised to wait for Pakistan to "surrender" some of the 20 terrorists. Gen Musharraf cannot be easily pressurised into handing over any Pakistani nationals to Interpol, leave alone India. Equally unlikely is the surrender of Dawood Ibrahim or Chota Shakeel, who in any case are gangsters rather than terrorists. India could have some former Khalistanis

India cannot bend its near-strategic equal Pakistan to its will, as the US could in Afghanistan. It is in New Delhi's own interest to de-escalate the current eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Today's build-up is the largest-ever, with seven lakh men mobilised. Anything can go wrong: a terrorist attack inspired by an agency used to sabotage Gen Musharraf's plans, an overzealous local commander getting ideas, or a plain South Asia-style goof-up.

The consequences will become increasingly disastrous the longer India waits. Today, the Vajpayee government can draw some satisfaction from the fact that Gen Musharraf has delivered "anti-terrorist" action -- although not entirely under India's muscle-flexing.

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Mr Vajpayee must draw the line here. Instead of indulging in more brinkmanship, he should work on a solution to the Kashmir problem. He can widen the political opening provided by the Taliban's defeat and Gen Musharraf's new anti-jehadi turn. But first, de-escalate.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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himself and change Pakistan's character. Zia's project unfolded in its most developed form through the Taliban, through Pakistan's attempt to strategically annex Afghanistan, and through promotion of a variety of militant groups, especially in Kashmir.

Gen Musharraf has started cutting the umbilical cord between the state and *jehadi* terrorism. This prolonged process could eventually mean purging the army, even cleansing the ISI.

It is by no means certain that Gen Musharraf will succeed. His agenda will antagonise some of his own colleagues as well as bigoted mul-

fault Gen Musharraf for omitting to mention the "Lahore process" or "Shimla agreement". What matters is he unconditionally condemned all forms of terrorism and extremism's "Kalashnikov culture". Equally significant was his insistence that Pakistani groups must not mess around in other countries.

Gen Musharraf's agenda involves strict regulation of *madrassas* and mosques, and redefinition of *jehad* as a fight against poverty, illiteracy and backwardness. His agenda can potentially transform Pakistan into a modern, forward-looking, society no longer obsessed with intolerant

won't do to accept -- as New Delhi does -- that Kashmir is a bilateral issue, and then refuse a bilateral dialogue. Failure to discuss Kashmir bilaterally could invite external intervention, with unpalatable consequences.

The US is in a uniquely powerful position. It is courted by both New Delhi and Islamabad. It has been the mediator in India's post-December 13 brinkmanship. Having allowed America a pivotal role, India cannot easily resist its friendly (or not-so-friendly) involvement in Kashmir -- if bilateralism fails. Bilateralism must be made to work.

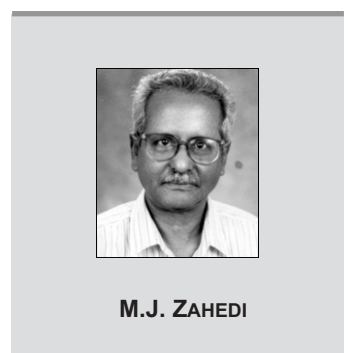
Equally important, India must

handed over. But that would be a minor consolation after the big gain from Gen Musharraf's outlawing of JeM and LeT.

It would be unwise and unrealistic for India to cast itself in the mould of a superpower by demanding that Pakistan surrender the 20 suspects, or else... India has not established convincing links between them and the Parliament attack; it has mostly raked up old cases.

The US was itself wrong, as this Column has argued, to use military force in Afghanistan. It has ended up killing at least 3,700 innocent Afghans 500 more people than were killed in New York's Twin Towers.

'Best deeds that any military government may have done'



M.J. ZAHEDI

LAST week two events predominated in the local Press. These were President Pervez Musharraf's address to the nation and the US Secretary of State Mr Colin Powell's visit to Islamabad and New Delhi. Musharraf told the nation about certain decisions which, in the words of *Dawn*, "most people inside and outside Pakistan thought had long been overdue". They were also bold and, to quote *Dawn* again, "even his most ardent admirers had not expected him to act so swiftly and decisively".

The paper was referring to certain decisions the President had taken in the domestic field. These were: (a) banning certain militant religious organisations and (b) regulating 'madrassahs' and mosques. The speech, above all, was noted for the President's emphatic declaration that Pakistan would not allow anyone to use its territory for terrorism anywhere in the world. Besides being primarily meant for Pakistanis to inform them of the regime's policies and decisions, the speech also addressed international concerns about the activities of some terrorist organizations in the country, and the government's decision not to allow them to

exist and spread hatred and violence.

Most of the organisations banned had not made any contribution to Islamic causes, instead their leadership were responsible for assassinations and bomb blasts, even in places of worship. The President pointed out that last year alone no less than 400 people fell victims to these organisations' terrorist actions. *Dawn* was certain that the banning of these would

The other newspapers took note of the President's remarks on de-escalation. *The Nation* noted that India seems to have digested Musharraf's categorical refusal to give it the custody of persons it accuses of terrorist acts. India, it thought, could make the issue a bone of contention to keep the tension alive. Therefore Washington should urge New Delhi to waste no time to resume normal diplomatic relations, call off other mea-

The other topic that occupied most space in the newspapers last week was the constitutional changes proposed by the President. The debatable question that is being asked is can the President make changes in the constitution? According to the Supreme Court, he cannot. So the question that will be debated is whether they change any constitutional provision?

By the proposed changes Gen. Musharraf, according to *The News*,

country a colour of religious fundamentalism and of harbouring terrorists. From that representation, the President's announcement has given Pakistan the image of a liberal, modern, democratic and developing state.

The induction of technocrats will boost the quality of leadership and expertise in the parliament to deal with global, economic, political, diplomatic and social issues, often found lacking in elected but poorly

350 seats (from 237) is not commensurate with the population of 14 million. They say in a federal system, the number of seats need not be commensurate with the country's population because the National Assembly is not the only legislature functioning in the country. The legislative duties are divided between the centre and the four provinces, which among them have about 450 elected members. One analyst said if India were to follow our formula, its Lok Sabha would grow to 4,000 members. An increase to 300, inclusive of women and technocrats, would have been more than sufficient.

But the fixing of minimum educational qualification of BA degree for the contestants has been termed as not only impractical but also an infringement of the human rights. One said, it is a joke on a nation that is 'still burdened by 73 per cent illiteracy rate. The BA degree does not make a citizen more responsible in his duties nor does it make him politically conscious. These two qualities are acquired by going through the mill and not by virtue of a college degree. The government should not go ahead with this proposal. One writer said political parties would find it especially difficult to women graduates as contestants because in Pakistan girls usually drop out to marry early. However, he said, 'the only silver lining to this absurd provision would be the ouster of those elements from the elections whose educational qualifications are limited to *dini madaris*'.

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Some analysts however think that raising the number of members in the Lower House was not practical... They say in a federal system, the number of seats need not be commensurate with the country's population because the National Assembly is not the only legislature functioning in the country. The legislative duties are divided between the centre and the four provinces, which among them have about 450 elected members... An increase to 300, inclusive of women and technocrats, would have been more than sufficient.

LETTER FROM KARACHI

have a salutary effect on the law and order situation in the country.

The actions, the President made it clear, had not been taken under any foreign pressure, they were motivated only by Pakistan's national interests. Nor did they compromise Pakistan's foreign policy objectives as well as the cause of the freedom of the Kashmiri people. "Kashmir runs in our blood", he unequivocally declared. In no uncertain terms, he told Mr Vajpayee that the problem has to be resolved if there were to be peace and harmony in south Asia. Interestingly, and contrary to most expectations, the President did not refer to Indian troops build-ups along Pakistan's borders but declared that Pakistan's armed forces were quite capable of defending the motherland.

ures it has taken in the mean time, and quickly thin out the troops on the border.

The News said that the mixed signals coming out of New Delhi reflect a sense of confused bewilderment, 'with the Indian leadership unable to decide where to go now with its military machine on Pakistani borders waiting for shooting orders'. It bluntly said that the Indians have boxed themselves into a corner by confusing the Kashmiris' struggle for self-determination with terrorism. *The News* also took note of New Delhi's desire that the world keep its hands off Kashmir and said New Delhi cannot expect partial intervention to help its cause (it sought world intervention to stop what it calls Pakistan-sponsored terrorism) and wish the world away on the core problem.

'has immensely increased the level of confidence and trust in his government's promises to restore democracy later this year'. He announced an increase in the number of members of the National Assembly, the government's decision to revert to the joint electorate system and give more representation to women and technocrats in the parliament.

The announcement has been welcomed by all sections of the population. Increasing the number of MNAs and giving a far larger and stronger say to women in the parliament will give a quantum jump to improve Pakistan's image'. By reserving a substantial number of seats for women, it has been ensured that in future women would not be taken for granted. Some recent happenings had given the

educated representatives who lack finesse in good governance. The reversion to a joint electorate system will end a highly discriminatory procedure that placed the country's non-Muslim minorities outside mainstream politics. Further, the step will end a cumbersome and time consuming process that required two electoral rolls and further sub-divisioning of one of the lists to detail the seats and voters' names according to their religious beliefs. These changes would go down among the best deeds that any military government may have done for the country, *The News* commented.

Some analysts however think that raising the number of members in the Lower House was not practical. One thought that increasing the strength of the national assembly to

OPINION

Arsenic, cricket and the WB

M.I. HASAN

AS an occasional visitor to Bangladesh and intermittent reader of *The Daily Star*, it was a delight over the past few days to read the sardonic pieces by Afsan Chowdhury both in the op-ed section (on Arsenic) and in the sports section (on our cricket team). He must be congratulated for his writing. They are so different from the drab stuffs: bringing in gynecologists, the Finance Minister, the IMF-World Bank. In his accounts of the recent jamboree organized on the Arsenic problem as well as non-performing of the cricket team, and the economy and/or the Finance Minister.

It is refreshing to read the wry humor in his analyses of the current sad scenarios in Bangladesh, with the hint of the tragic-comic consequences on the country. The dubious roles of the Government and 'donors', such as the World Bank (WB) and the Japanese agency, over the past decade regarding the Arsenic problem needs to be exposed further. How so much money is being spent (mostly on self-serving seminars), how money borrowed by the Government of Bangladesh from the World Bank is being used mostly for unrealistic advice from foreign consultants, and how different donors (such as the Japanese or the Canadians)

have banded together to make their own deals without making much of dent yet on the widespread Arsenic problem.

Another aspect that requires more exposure, of course, is how weak-kneed governments in Bangladesh have fallen prey to these donors peddling their agenda and not-so-relevant ideas. The recent non-productive exchange between the IMF-World Bank and the Government (read the current Finance Minister) has again exemplified the uneven nature of these deals. It was astounding (as an expatriate familiar with the worlds of international finance) to see the coverage and the courtesies given to the IMF team last week culminating in a meeting with the Prime Minister, no less! I guess the Finance Minister presumes now that pleasing the IMF-WB operatives by making self-deprecatory off-the-cuff remarks is more worthwhile than proper protocol and maintaining self-esteem of the nation!

On the other side, the second-rate professionals at IMF-WB (as characterized by Nobel winner Joseph Stiglitz) must be chuckling at giving nothing away and at the same time getting uncalled for royal treatment unlike elsewhere (except possibly for some banana republics!) -- and in the bargain finally getting a Finance Minister to mouth

their own agenda in his dialect.

A similar syndrome, of over-reaching and mouthing more than one can deliver, seems to afflict the sports arena. As reported recently, myopic politics in the land-grabbing tradition as applied to the Football Federation has led to the FIFA banning Bangladesh, where the game was going from bad to worse anyway. On the other side, the cricket team continues on what must be a record-breaking run of pathetic performance as a Test team and, notwithstanding all the media hype and the politically-correct changes also in the Cricket Board, it is difficult to visualize any significant improvement. It would indeed be more self-respecting for our men to 'retire hurt' now from Tests instead of plumbing low levels of performance to the point of absurdity, including recruiting gynecologists.

Similar to the case of the misplaced gynecologists serving the cricket team(s), the roles of the IMF-WB and the local midwives in charge of the Bangladesh economy now also need to be realistically evaluated. And in such an arduous task of self-analysis for the nation that must be undertaken sooner rather than later -- not by the parasitical breed of consultants and pundits -- the role of an honest media would be crucial.

Taliban connection in Bangladesh? Please watch your words

M. GHOLAM MOSTAFA

THERE'S a Bangla proverb which rendered in English will read like this -- even chop off your nose if that hurts your enemy. Awami League Chief Sheikh Hasina, while holidaying in the US with her children made some critical statements for the consumption of American government, press and public. She told them that the present government of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has link with the Taliban. Recently, AL leaders led by Abdus Samad, former foreign minister (of the erstwhile government) called on UK Prime Minister Tony Blair when the latter was here for a brief visit on his way to the other South Asian countries. Blair's mission was to drum up support for international coalition for war against terrorism. It's widely believed by the western nations that the Taliban, with its headquarters in Afghanistan, harboured and trained terrorists through the global network of al-Qaida. Samad in his chief's vein told Blair the same message that a couple of cabinet ministers of the incumbent government had strong links with the Taliban.

After September 11 terrorist attack the US crafted an interna-

tional coalition with UK as one of her strong allies, and a strong supporter. The West reckoned Osama bin Laden as the prime suspect who masterminded the terrorist attack on US which took a toll of 6000 plus lives of 50 different nationalities.

An infuriated US led campaign pounded Afghanistan reducing it to rubble in a bid to catch bin Laden and his host Mullah Omar bring them to justice. The superpower's air action over last three months has left Afghanistan in a shambles killing thousands of faceless Afghan men, women, old and infirm -- the mayhem has been called 'collateral damage'.

At this point, a flashback may be pertinent. US ex-President Jimmy Carter visited Bangladesh before the October 1 polls to scout ensuing national polls and to feel the pulse of contending leaders. Knowing our culture of politics of confrontation and belligerence between rival parties who cry foul at each other's action, however, pragmatic, Carter took Sheikh Hasina in confidence to tell her a piece of his mind. He said he knew how much it hurts when as an incumbent President he had the taste of defeat in US polls which elected Bill Clinton his successor. He exhorted our leaders, no future

opposition in the Parliament should desist from attending its sessions and further pleaded with them to abide by poll-results, come what may. Our leaders readily agreed and an apparently contented Carter returned home.

The October poll-results overturned the apple-cart on Awami League giving BNP a thumping victory. Although the AL, the oldest political party of the country with its net-work entrenched down to the grassroots level, garnered numerically more votes than BNP, the latter mustered more parliamentary seats to give it a berth of the driving seat of government. This is a strange calculus in democracy with which the AL couldn't come to terms. They reckoned it a defeat, loss of face and seemed to portend an end of the world for AL.

But October poll was hailed as peaceful and neutral reflecting an impartial verdict by local and foreign pollsters who came to monitor from across the globe.

Ironically the AL went back on its promise made to the visiting US President and made a volte-face. Sheikh Hasina cried foul and demanded a fresh poll. She called the poll manipulated by "crude

rigging" in order to give BNP a walk-over. Harping on her pet conspiracy theory the AL chief brazenly accused the Election Commissioner of pulling the string. With every passing day we found she was graduating her scale of vilification implicating subsequently President Shahabuddin and the Armed Forces. President Shahabuddin was chosen by the AL, and the former's conduct was admitted on all hands as above board and exemplary. Our Armed Forces, proven as bastion in recent years, were pressed into election duty only to oversee and maintain law and order conducive to unhindered turnout of voters and peaceful polling. Flabbergasted at the accusation against his integrity the President, an ex-chief justice lamented saying that, in spite of his long eventful and responsible judicial career he couldn't comprehend the meaning of "crude rigging."

Public memory has been proverbially brief. In spite of it, we haven't forgotten the fact of AL being chummy with these elements now expediently profaned as Taliban. It's still fresh in our memory of AL wagging movement against autocrat Ershad and BNP government in

early and mid 1990s with them.

Communicating with foreign power about country's internal matters to the point of imploring tacitly their intervention is unprecedented in the conduct of leaders of any sovereign country. To accuse the country's government having imaginary link with the Taliban, is a political vendetta at a time when the world situation has been volatile and a US led war on against terrorism impacting globally. Such remarks from responsible persons are fraught with grave implication. Our leaders aren't either conversant with diplomatic parlance or incapable of comprehending nuance and connotation of words spoken for consumption internationally.

Have they ever thought of the immediate repercussion on thousands of our expatriates already beleaguered after September 11, and for whom the AL supreme during her many visits of the US could do nothing to promote their status as immigrant or to facilitate their earning a decent living. Do we have to surmise that all these vituperation only exposes their blatant indifference in which they hold their country's interest?