

Biswa Ijtema ends

Messages of peace and moderation going out from Dhaka

BISWA Ijtema, the second largest gathering of Muslims in the world was held at Tongi in a year marked by a momentous change in the global outlook. As nearly two million devotees participated in the *Akheri Munajat* or the final prayers yesterday, they not only affirmed their faith but also brought forth a certain strength to meet the challenges ahead. The ancient definitions of piety, strength and relationship with the secular world are being tested as never before.

One hopes that all concerned will exercise restraint and remember that the business of the state should in no way be interfered with by any zealotry of the faith. While Islamic theologians may have the right to speak on many issues, it would be appropriate if they didn't delve in temporal matters. Bangladesh doesn't subscribe to mass murder of innocents under any ideological guise whatsoever. It's not a question of moderation or fundamental interpretation of Islam but an article of faith for Bangladesh. People should do well to remember that just as on certain matters, there is no debate on the cannons of Islam, fanatical use of religion is an anachronism in Islam that basically stands for peace, harmony and coexistence in societies.

The Biswa Ijtema has always been a peaceful congregation and the tradition has been lived up to this year, too.

We wish the best to those who braved all the hazards of a journey in a difficult period to attend the gathering and hope that they have benefited immensely from mingling at Tongi which remains the proud host of the great annual event.

Our thoughts were with Biswa Ijtema and remain with its peaceful objectives.

Rule of law vindicated for now

Government's behaviour was high-handed all the way

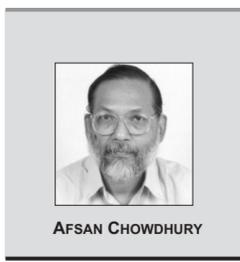
SHARIAR Kabir has been set free on six months' interim bail after 58 days in detention he underwent in an alleged sedition case. This has happened by virtue of a High Court ruling. On the material question of his detention though, the HC in an order issued a week ago had declared it illegal. And while granting the *ad interim* bail on January 19 the Division Bench of the HC also issued a rule on the government to show cause why the accused should not be granted bail. In other words, the windmill of rule of law has started moving at the behest of the High Court.

The arguments that must have weighed with the HC in granting interim bail to Shahriar Kabir are: (a) all the materials on the basis of which he is being charged with sedition -- the video-tapes, footage on demonstrations, a placard, etc. -- remain firmly in possession of the authorities concerned, so that he could not erase or destroy any 'evidence' if he were set on bail; and (b) his being a noted citizen also ruled out the possibility of his going into hiding when released to avoid facing the case in court. The fact that bail petitions earlier submitted before the lower courts had been rejected obviously meant that the latter were not moved by the above considerations.

Need we recall here after we ran last Friday's commentary on the subject how at every step of the way since Shahriar Kabir arrived from Kolkata there has been abuse of power? We are not trying to pronounce any judgement in the case; all we are seeking to do is underline the fact that the whole state machinery seemed arrayed against him with abuse of power (not permitting family visit and access to legal protection) being in evidence against a single individual. The sheer enormity of the state power as vested in the Constitution obligates a government to be highly responsible in the exercise of such power. Protection of the fundamental rights of citizens by the state is the supreme test of the rule of law. The state as the custodian of rule of law cannot allow itself to be impinging on the civil liberties and human rights of individual citizens without denigrating itself to ordinary levels.

What we have seen in the Shahriar case is a distorted attempt to go by the letter of the law, and missing out on its spirit entirely. Democracy is not all about getting elected and forming a government; it is very much a matter of setting norms and standards in a system. And this is all the more expected of a government that has had a massive electoral mandate to exercise.

The unbearable lengthiness of enemy lists



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

WE live in an age of enemies. We are defined by them and rewrite our life according to the names we need to hate and deny. It's in our hate that we become bigger than the venom of our enemies. That's why we need lists of those we want to eliminate. That's why we need to establish a process of exclusion and inclusion. We are thus both Us and Them. Sometimes, we are the same simultaneously. These governments like the one before and the one after live by lists. It's a culture which survives because there are lists of those we love and certainly of those we hate.

WHILE working in the history of the Liberation War Project in the 80s, we accessed a huge number of archival files. I saw many lists of the included and the excluded. I showed a list of writers not allowed to work for the official radio. That included the name of the Project chief Hasan Hafizur Rahman. I didn't have the heart to show him that someone who was a close friend had included his name.

But the list held strange encounters. In the fifties and sixties, no one who had once been a member of the Communist Party could hold a government job unless he got a clearance from the US embassy. In one particular case, a clearance was sought from the embassy for a broadcast media person and cultural activist as he was being considered for a post in the Dhaka PID.

The US embassy replied that this was not necessary because the said person was working in the US embassy for the last few years as an information officer. Tells you a bit about how governments decide based on intelligence reports and their lists.

WHEN the liberation war was reaching its final hours, people were busy making lists. There were lists for killing, lists for arresting, taking

entire set of fresh list was constructed. However, they made enemies at a furious speed. Few will remember the Rakhi Bahini and the dreaded lists supplied by the National Security Intelligence (NSI). Somehow, many people made it to one list or another. In those days of radicalism and rage, one tried to change society with the same passion one tries to make monies now. Many had the wrong friends, the *rat Bahini*, who were openly

Minister. Apparently, the cause was helped by the list which had most of the Committee members' name on it. But the sovereignty of the list remained as testified by the arrests carried out by Gen. Zia's martial law.

BUT regimes like lists always change according to the weather. As the BNP era began to wane, rumours of a military take over began to make the more than the usual energetic rounds. I would

containing the names of certain ladies who were named as "business support" persons. Apparently, they were PR people and created quite a stir. It was a list which everyone wanted to see but not be in. Whoever dreamed it up certainly reduced the number of female visitors to the Secretariat.

But when Ershad fell the lists came fast and furious. I think more lists were made than there were people on it. I wonder how many in

AFTER AL's list, BNP has embarked on a major list making exercise and even set up a committee under a bureaucrat politician. He has made a list and therefore sanctified the process of hunting down those not found favourable. It has now become institutionalized and will never leave the political and administrative domain. It has been listed as part of the system. As an AL politician said before granting an interview to a journalist, "Is he on our list or their list?"

BUT which is the mother of all lists? It's the one prepared by the al-Badr in 1971 by the retreating army greedy to slaughter by design. It has gone down in the history of Bangladesh as the moment when infamy struck.

That's why there is a sense of *deja vu* -- something that may have happened before -- when the Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ) decides to prepare a list of atheists, *murtads* (apostates) and traitors as well as collaborators of the Awami League regime in the government service. The last time someone prepared such a list and took action, many were killed. IOJ is a member of the 4-party alliance and would not have dared to do this if the government hadn't provided the indulgence. What is the next action after preparing the list? What is the safeguard that somebody will not go for action? Does the government realize what it has let loose or does it approve?

It began with the statement of the Khatib asking for the end of the USA and has now reached the point of preparing a list of "Islamic traitors".

I had asked the Generals in Pakistan once about the al-Badr killing in 1971. This was one area of shame for them too. But they said this: "The al-Badr was of your own kind, of your own blood. They are you."

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

There is a sense of *deja vu* -- something that may have happened before -- when the Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ) decides to prepare a list of atheists, *murtads* (apostates) and traitors as well as collaborators of the Awami League regime in the government service. The last time someone prepared such a list and took action, many were killed. IOJ is a member of the 4-party alliance and would not have dared to do this if the government hadn't provided the indulgence. What is the next action after preparing the list?

over property and list of people who had taken over property of others and now were being listed for revenge. In fact, the Mujibnagar government's concern for a free for all listing and what followed in those days was high. They feared that a revenge syndrome would overwhelm the new administration. Documents have been published already showing that aspect. But as soon as the old order passed away and the new one came in lists surfaced. And all those who care to remember the days of December will recall the decapitated dead bodies, victims of words spelt as names in some lists, victims of real or imagined enmity. It took a long time before matters settled down but not before properties had resurfaced in others' names, women had become somebody else's consorts and corpses had taken shelter in anonymous graves. Thirty years after that people are still looking for names in one list or another.

WHEN Awami League took over in 1971, many went down and an

against all order and established rule. How they were identified is not known but they were picked up and rarely seen again. We kept a list of the disappeared and the pages got fatter by the day. However, suddenly one day, it was over in a muggy August dawn. And a new list emerged. A relative of ours whose uncle was a member of the Mujib cabinet broke down and wept hearing he had been picked up, a listed man.

But the list isn't always negative. In those days, some of us who weren't very friendly towards Awami League's policy of random pick up at will ran an outfit called the Committee for Civil Liberties and Legal Aid. It was full of anti-AL people but a small minority was opposed to martial law which but most welcomed. Soon most left to form BNP while the minority led by Dr. Ahmed Sharif was left holding the depleted committee. Our members were very eminent and one VP is now the present President, one became the Speaker and the GS became the VP under Ershad and now is the Law

frequent an office where a friend would host his friends, some in the army. One day, as the discussion got animated, an army major said with great enthusiasm, "Next time, we come to power, we plan to take care of everyone. We have got all our lists ready." It certainly never occurred to him that taking over was not something like waking up in the morning and parading in the field. But that was a reality.

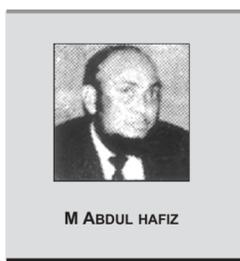
When Ershad took over, if anybody had to face the brunt of a list, it was the BNP of that era. Most of the BNP leaders ended up in jails and energetic corruption investigations began everywhere. So many ancient dead lists revived to haul people in and jail them. Only the lucky ones had enough money to pay their way through. Others had to spend time inside. And the list, prepared even before Ershad came to power, dominated the proceedings.

THERE was some relief of course, though of rather unsavoury variety, when a list was circulated

that list were ever involved, how many punished and how many totally innocent. But list making is part of a culture where accusations can be made without proof because accusation itself is construed as evidence. There were lists of get-rich-quickies, women close to Ershad and instant millionaires. A magazine published by the Freedom Party of alleged Bangabandhu killers Farook and Rasheed reached dizzying circulation heights doing just this. People were banned from radio and TV for being on the list. What mattered was the list and not the "crime." It was the culture that mattered not the content.

IN the next two regimes, the same culture continued. Many people were beaten up and many blacklisted. It was all right to be a beater of an innocent but not being beaten by others which was evidence of guilt. This circulatory logic controlled everything and when Ershad was practically denied rights to campaign, nobody protested. He was after all at the top of the list.

Americans awaiting vindication of Afghan war?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

WITH al-Qaida's Tora Bora complex besieged and finally overrun it was the endgame of US' war on terrorism against Afghanistan in the middle of last month. But it fell short of a classical victory as the intended object of the most expensive and promiscuously violent manhunt in history remained elusive. Neither Osama nor his close lieutenants were found in their lairs. It was in spite of a cordoning-off operation carried out with great precision. Not only the US' intense aerial bombing continued with full fury most often the 'Daisy cutters', the most powerful explosive outside nuclear arsenal, were indiscriminately dropped resulting in large scale destruction of the cave complex in Tora Bora. Two weeks before the main assault the US war planes carried out massive bombing of the villages in

the region as a punitive measure, because the Americans suspected the villages of playing host to al-Qaida fighters. When on 16 December, Hazrat Ali, commander of anti-Taliban Eastern Shura announced the capture of last cave the prized objective of the first war of twenty-first century was still missing. None of the soldiers of the Eastern Shura with American and British special forces in attendance took any bet on the likelihood of bin-Laden's cap-

ingly looking askance about the great wisdom behind the war. After all, to what end the billion of dollars worth of munitions were rained over Afghanistan where thousands were brutally killed? The massacre of captured Taliban soldiers at Qala-i-Jangi and Takhte-Pul will one day put the US in the dock of history which is bound to be harsh in its verdict. Why were the villages around Tora Bora were mercilessly punished disregarding the Eastern

claimed was found in a deserted Jalalabad residence. Anticipating Osama's capture within days this evidence had presumably been assembled to put him before the new military tribunals that the US has set up for the trial of foreigners involved in terrorist violence. But, in the first place Osama is out of the reach of the Americans for any trial. More importantly, the Arabs, conversant with Osama and his dialects, rejected it as fake while their

just the juiciest bit? If the latter, where is the rest? How long the video has been in American hand and why has it been released at this time? It should not be wholly taken at face value." The age from Melbourne, Australia asks: "If computer-generated graphics can fake Forrest Gump shaking President Kennedy's hand and late John Wayne hawking beer, how can viewers be sure that a video tape of Osama bin Laden bragging Sep-

uncture of history is not to be so easily daunted. The world premiere of the bin Laden video was accompanied by a collective shout of self righteousness from the US media, the common refrain being that the US was owed an apology by all who had cast doubt on its insistence that bin Laden was culpable.

The hour of arrogance is indeed dark hour in a nation's history and victory can, at times, make one adopt a tunnel vision of things. The US war in Afghanistan and the victory it achieved irrespective of whatever was the cost involved seems to have established prototype for similar campaign elsewhere. It will begin with massive aerial bombardment to be followed with the insertion of a small team of Western special forces. The force would then constitute nucleus of a broader alliance of hand picked loyalists to effect a change of regime. The new regime must serve the interest of the US. It is however to be seen if the US would be indefinitely receiving the international backing to promote her foreign policy with regards to terrorism. Britain, the most loyal ally has already been muttering aloud about the risks involved in an invasion of Iraq which the US is thinking loud to take on next.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

The hour of arrogance is indeed dark hour in a nation's history and victory can, at times, make one adopt a tunnel vision of things. The US war in Afghanistan and the victory it achieved irrespective of whatever was the cost involved seems to have established prototype for similar campaign elsewhere.

ture. Neither the captured al-Qaida could offer any clue. The US intelligence agencies estimated that he could have fled into higher reaches of the mountain with the remnant of al-Qaida.

But to bring the Osama saga to a definite conclusion has now become a political compulsion for Bush Administration. An unusual delay in this regard can recoil on the government and the current high approval rating for the Administration and its war in Afghanistan may plummet. The people are increas-

Shura's appeal? Even the Americans themselves would be in future bitten by their conscience for perpetrating a cruelty unless it can be justified by achieving the objectives of the war -- apprehension of bin Laden and his host Mullah Omar.

Even if not captured, dead or alive Osama had appeared on television screen the world over just a week earlier than the allies' failed effort in Tora Bora in the middle of the last month. He was shown gloating over September 11 carnage in a video tape the Americans

governments loyal to the US for variety of reasons tended to accept it as evidence. Even the western press has a great deal of reservation as to its credibility.

For example, the Guardian of Britain observed: 'This video is so audacious and astonishing that something about it is put up job. It provokes all kinds of skeptical question. When, where and why was the video made? How was it obtained by the Americans? Is it the sole price of incriminating evidence collected against bin-Laden or is it

tember 11 attack is real?' These comments are clearly an index of the dubious image that has been engendered by US efforts at media management since the war in Afghanistan began.

The cynics suggest the tape was a clever forgery made by Russian intelligence or the US government, with incriminating statements spliced into an otherwise boring exchange of pleasantries between Osama bin Laden and a visiting admirer. The US with all the resources at her disposal and at this

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Bishwa Ijtema and our VIP's security

I see that the President, PM and the Leader of the Opposition will be attending the Akheri Munajat. How is this reconciled with their SSF security guidelines?

If the three most protected people in Bangladesh can attend such a massive public gathering, where there is no way to prevent miscreants, if any, why do we have to go through the routine inconvenience of roadblocks and massive motorcades with armour plated Mercedes?

MA Dhaka

Privatisation of enterprises

The state of enterprises continues to be discussed in all the forums; even the Chief Executive of our privatisation board has been given the status of a minister but the net result is a big zero.

It is being considered that the privatisation will thrive successfully but as an humble share holder of several dozen public limited companies (PLCs), my experience suggests otherwise.

It is true the PLCs execute their business in different manners, but their performance is very poor in the context of return on investment by the shareholders. Usually the private limited companies trade

their shares at our stock markets at ten to sixty per cent of the issue price though they raised their share capital four to six years ago.

Most of them failed to pay any dividend and some did not pay the dividend even after declaring in annual meetings. The circumstances are enough to disclose our future of privatisation in this country. Rather I think it is time to punish the entrepreneurs who plundered public money through sale of shares and debentures.

Mahabur Rahman Dasani, Bagerhat

India shouldn't betray peace hopes

It is true that up to now the Indians have not abandoned their hawkish approach towards Pakistan, despite the historic speech by the Pakistani President.

If banning five religious extremist organisations in a go, and arresting over a thousand and a half alleged religious extremists in a span of four days, are not matching "words with actions," then what is?

If urging India to withdraw its arsenal and troops from the LOC and border, and insisting on the resolution of Kashmir dispute through dialogue, is not a policy of "restraint," then what is? All this amounts to a belligerent and arrogant attitude on the part of hawkish leaders currently ruling India.

You simply cannot expect one side to be peace loving and restraint-oriented and the other side to be war mongering and belligerent, and yet expect the two to make peace.

India should not betray the peace hopes of South Asian people. Salman Khan, on e-mail

What a shame!

The USA has kept bombing Afghanistan for the last two/three months or so but has failed miserably to achieve its objectives.

They have ousted the Taliban regime and this has been their only successful mission. But their main mission was to get hold of Osama bin Laden and they failed to capture him.

The Americans should feel ashamed of themselves because they have sent thousands of soldiers in Afghanistan, bombed every part of that nation just to capture one person and yet failed to capture him.

Minhaj Dhaka

For peace international mediation is 'a must'

During his recent peace-mission visit to the sub-continent Tony Blair reminded the stubborn Indians, "the only way to resolve Kashmir is to seek agreement by dialogue."

He was severely criticised by the Indian officials when he stated that Pakistan's position on Kashmir was 'very strong'.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, about to start his visit to Pakistan and India, has said he would ask the leaders of the two countries to renew direct dialogue over Kashmir, saying such talks were vital to reduce tensions and troops withdrawal along the border.

President Musharraf has already appealed to the world community, especially the US, to play an active role in resolving the Kashmir dispute for the sake of peace and harmony in the region.

The US must play a key role in resolving the key Kashmir dispute by serving as a mediator.

India will continue to brand Pakistanis 'hard-liners', 'militants', 'fundamentalists' or 'extremists', but past 54 years experience proves that the Kashmir crisis demands international mediation.

Mr. Powell, you have demonstrated a statesman like approach by asking both nations, "I think I can help talk to both sides about getting a dialogue started." Once it is started, you let us know what role you would like us to play, if any, or if you think it is better for us to play none, so be it.

Any negative Indian reaction is bound to disappoint those who hope for peace in South Asia.

Mohsin Meer Lahore, Pakistan

Resolve the Kashmir

determination, for the sake of regional peace, security and stability.

It is clear that South Asia will remain a volatile region and a threat to world peace till the resolution of the Kashmir issue in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It's, therefore, time for the world community, especially the United States, to come forward and convince the Indian leadership to shun arrogance and belligerence and accept Kashmir as the root-cause of tension in the region.

The ball is in India's court. It is for India to respond to the reality on the ground and save the impoverished South Asian people from death and destruction. India must take tangible steps for settlement of the Kashmir dispute, rather than beating the old drum of cross-border terrorism.

Salman Khan Dammam, Saudi Arabia

Don't politicise everything

It was a shame to learn that Bangladesh has been banned by FIFA from participating in any international tournament, thanks to the government's especially the Sports Minister's stubborn attitude. This is another glaring example of the government's tendency to politicise everything.

I feel disgraced to find that these narrow-minded people are our

leaders to whom party politics is more important than national interest.

In the given circumstances, we can only hope against hope that our "honourable" State Minister for Sports will revise his rigid position to give back the nation whatever prestige it has (if there is still any!). Shikder Akash Yougoslavia

Purdah in Islam

I have been reading the various letters published in The Daily Star regarding purdah and its relevance. What is interesting is that most of the opinions were voiced by men! The 'liberals' who advocate against hijab and the 'conservatives' who are for it are mostly male. We did hear from a few females but their number is not significant.

What I want to propose is that why don't you leave it to the women to decide whether they want to practice hijab or not? They have to maintain/discard the purdah, not the men. If we are democratic in spirit, we should leave the issue in the hands of the women.

What is interesting also is the quoting of scriptures and invoking the name of God in support of argument. I would like to comment that Sharia is followed in Saudi Arabia, a country notorious for its human rights violations. The opposite holds true as well in the case of Turkey. Wearing hijab in Turkey is a

punishable offence, thereby a violation of human rights. Bangladesh is a democracy. Therefore matters of personal freedom such as hijab should not be socially imposed.

Yahya USA

1971 hangover?

The January 17 issue carried a letter where the writer referred to the '1971 hangover' of middle-aged men. Well, I was not around yet when independence was declared in March of 1971. Nonetheless, I will assure the writer that this 'hangover' infects many Bengalis, young, middle-aged, and old alike.

I do not advocate dwelling on the minute details of a thirty-year-old past while forgetting far more important present day travails of the land. But make no mistake about it; the War of Independence was the defining moment of our present day nationhood. That struggle embodied all that is noble, glorious, and sublime in the Bengali spirit.

This patriot has absolutely no intention of getting over this 'hangover'. For as the ancient Judean scribe said of his exiled people's fond remembrances of their land "If I forget thee, may my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue lose speech".

Long Live Bangladesh.

ES Missouri, USA