

Do terrorists attend law and order meetings?

Let's see an improvement in the situation at the earliest

THE "Chittagong Affair" where the State Minister for Home along with other leaders of the ruling party held a meeting which was attended by a sterling cast of listed terrorists stretches the limits of reason to understand the process of governing that has been chosen. Considering the already chaotic law and order situation showing little sign of improvement, this latest incident of law minders mingling with lawbreakers is a new addition to confusion.

A section of the media have reported that this was caused by internal rivalry within the ruling party and that these terrorists were sent there to specially embarrass the State Minister who didn't know anything about the criminals. But this explanation actually makes the situation worse. If political rivalry within the party is so high that criminals are used as political weapons, when are they going to be caught?

That also means that the said minister is not up to the task when criminals attend meetings called by him who is responsible for arresting them. It also exposes a desperate vein of incompetence if this happened because of ignorance on anyone's part. And if that happened with everyone's knowledge, the less said the better.

Ruling party apologists have stressed a lot on this internal party rivalry and the apparent innocence of the State Minister but how that translates into an effective excuse for their presence is still not clear. Among other things, it means that leaders and ministers are in full contact with criminals and this becomes a matter of concern only when they cause public embarrassment. The incident exposed the hollow nature of the terrorist nabbing campaign for sure.

However, in all fairness, the link between politicians and criminals is long and the previous government and the present have both a long record in this area. The present scene looks very absurd because the ruling party had made a basket full of promises and even now continues to claim a moral high ground on this issue. In reality it looks like the government isn't serious about clamping down. Electoral promises mean little. We would like to be disproved on this.

Ultimately that is the issue. The covenant between the elected and the voters has been put into question. It's the platform on which politics and governance is placed. By violating that, the government unwittingly risks ire beyond its capacity to manage. Bangladesh's own history has shown again and again that unfulfilled promises are not forgotten nor forgiven.

BSF firing

Hardly a sign of friendly border

IT has been incredibly shocking to learn that in less than a year's time, 69 Bangladeshis have lost their lives in BSF firing from across the border. It seems our compatriots have been sitting ducks to trigger-happy Indian border security personnel.

After the Roumari episode, things should have settled down, stabilised at the border following a series of parleys held at appropriate levels to defuse tensions that had built up then. But no, that expectation has been belied. And, if one were to add the present number of casualties to the totality of the virtually one-sided mayhem that has taken place, regardless of who came to power in Bangladesh, one would almost certainly term the situation as hostile. And, hostile without any reason whatsoever, if seen from the professed angle of good neighbourly spirit.

Frankly, all these hardly speak of friendly borders between India and Bangladesh, even though the governments of both countries interact with great ease and amity in all other parameters of their relationship. True, the land boundary agreement needs to be ratified by India and the border demarcation done accordingly; but that does not mean that in the interregnum Bangladeshi lives will fall like nine pins along the border! Border security is an Indian central government concern, so that the right kind of message must be sent across to BSF authority in West Bengal for any change to take place.

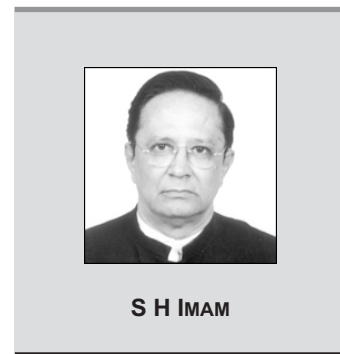
We urge our government to take up the matter in great earnest with the Indian government. Our protests should be followed up by intense interaction at the diplomatic level to effect a change in the unfortunate situation.

Meanwhile, the trouble-shooting mechanism of border security meetings will have to be used on an unflinching basis.

carrier flying to the same destination as soon as possible. However, the same case does not apply to Biman! I have observed passengers of the Business Class being downgraded to the economy class, with the promise that they would refund the 'difference' of the fares. And what a pity! The passengers of economy class whose seats are given away to the downgraded passengers from business class are often offloaded from the aircraft right before departure or boarding, and made to travel on another flight of Biman, and often not before three or four days later!

I was not surprised to hear that more than 30 economy class passengers were offloaded from a Biman flight on the 7th of January from Dhaka to London, and were made to stay over at Dhaka until they could find some seats in an

The shadow of Ayodhya Temple issue gets longer



S H IMAM

ATAL Behari Vajpayee seeks Sonia Gandhi's advice as their paths cross. If the verdict of the Indian state elections pointed to a reversal of fortunes for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the regional levels, apparently that was not on Prime Minister Vajpayee's mind as he greeted the now superbly Hindi-speaking Sonia whose Italian origin has for long drawn the BJP's flak, for all one knows.

He graciously asks Sonia if she would like him to skip the upcoming CHOGM visit in view of Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP)'s one year old threat to construct the Rama temple in Ayodhya on March 15 regardless of legal judgement awaited on the issue. The question is not whether Sonia said yes or no to influence Vajpayee's travel plans one way or the other: what is to be basically noted was the fact that she was

consulted on a developing situation of immense significance to India's internal stability and her external image.

To refresh our memory on the question, the 16th century Babri mosque was razed to the ground on December 6, 1992 by RSS and VHP, the extremist constituents of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Not content with it, Hindu priests or holymen, known as kar sevaks went on to threaten demonstrations if their right to pray at the site was not

at the risk of seeing the mosque razed to the ground'. It was palpable.

The regional repercussions of the Ayodhya incidents were terrifying and better not be recapitulated for the sake of discretion. All we can say is that the SAARC summity cycle got derailed from that point on as a spin off.

In reality, however, we cannot afford to hide our face in the dust like an ostrich does when facing an impending storm. South Asia today

costly misadventure.

As for Bangladesh itself, she has had communal tremors lately; and as a country neighbouring India, she has some vulnerability.

The Indian state elections have returned a frustrating verdict for the Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP is now left to rule four states -- Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Goa -- whereas Congress I is in control of 13 states. Out of sheer desperation, the militant outfits of BJP such as BHP and RSS might

encouraging the BHP to raise the Rama temple on the site where the Babri mosque lay for 430 years. In 1992 Narasimha Rao's folly as Prime Minister from the Congress party might have been to betray a motive to see BJP discredited for the destruction of the Babri mosque, but BJP can only beat the Congress I to it now by being wee bit secular and dissuading the VHP from the path of temple construction.

The verdict of the Indian state

time and again by Prime Minister Vajpayee that the matter as to who should get access to the site will be finally determined by the court of the land.

The field situation in Ayodhya is however boiling. Twenty thousand people are raring to converge on the site at a moment's notice. The police reportedly merely stood watching one time too many when some Hindu zealots breached the barricade meant for keeping everyone away from the sensitive location.

A debate in the Lok Sabha which Vajpayee will welcome on the subject as a means to defuse communal tension looks some way off. The position is merely chanting demand for a governmental guarantee that Hindu militants will be prevented from taking control of the disputed site. The thing is, a call for the BJP-led coalition government's resignation at the centre following their loss of control in the four states in the recent elections is being primed as the debate agenda gets relegated.

The Indian Muslims seem to have a fear that whatever remains of the inevitability about the fate of the mosque site and the access of the Muslims to it is being only delayed. This apprehension among them will have to be allayed by the sagacity of Indian leadership.

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JUST ANOTHER VIEW

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granted by Narasimha Rao, the then prime minister of India.

Rao at that time tried to make amends for his slack that had originally brought the Babri mosque down by ordering tough measures like banning fundamentalist organisations and dismissal of four state governments ruled by BJP. But an impression got formed early in the day that Rao 'was playing a deliberate game to discredit the BJP even

remains intrinsically more volatile than it was a decade ago when Ayodhya had hogged news headlines for the horrific reason of a mosque's desecration. There has been a complicated shift in straight-forward conventional definitions of fundamentalism, terrorism and counter-terrorism of late. Standard concepts have given way to self-righteous value-judgements and consequential tendency towards

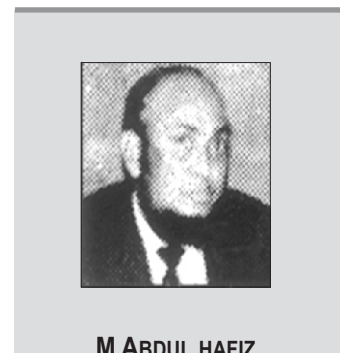
try to convert their threat for building a permanent Rama temple on the disputed site into a reality.

If they are allowed to do so, it might have spillage effects across the region already gone volatile with Indo-Pak dissension topped off by extraneous pulls and pressures. The situation could go out of hand if not headed off right away.

Since the BJP is in power it cannot work for its own undoing by

elections is likely to make the BJP-led government more reliant on its NDA allies for its existence for the remaining two and a half years of its tenure. Significantly, BJP has settled down to playing opposition in the state legislatures it has lost to Congress I or Samajwadi Dal. The BJP's coalition partners favour maintenance of status quo in Ayodhya as ordered by the court. The position has been reiterated

Public relation debacle or human rights abuse?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IT was a matter more of semantics while defining the status of al-Qaeda and Taliban prisoners now incarcerated at Guantanamo bay and entitling them to the treatment they are to be accorded during their captivity. From the beginning Washington tried to label them as 'unlawful combatant' and put them outside the purview of Geneva convention meaning that they can be interrogated in a manner that convention deems unlawful. The hawkish elements in the Bush administration firmly back this position. Vice President Dick Cheney, for example, described the prisoners as "really bad people" and stated that no one should feel bad or defensive about the quality of treatment they've received. Playing a second fiddle the British Prime Minister Tony Blair said that the prisoners were not good persons, but still they are being treated well.

Neither the Human Rights groups nor the Red Cross and not even the America's European allies agreed to the views. They have rather been increasingly vocal in demanding that the prisoners are treated in a

humane manner. The international outrage over the treatment of US-held al-Qaeda and Taliban prisoners assumed some stridency and the criticism of US obdurate policy on the issue took sharp edge with the recent publications of the pictures showing them in shackles with their heads and eyes covered. The critics argued that the al-Qaeda men were captured during the US war against terrorism in Afghanistan. This simple fact means the US must treat the prisoners according to the terms of Geneva convention and not arbitrarily decide their status and fate.

The article 4 of the third Geneva Convention defines prisoner of war

against the invading US Army. They were as such lawful combatants who fought in defence of their country according to the laws and customs of war.

Because of limited media access to Guantanamo and the Pentagon's own hauling of the information about the prisoners which are often vague, flippant and wrong there is a growing concern about the fate of its inmates. In spite of the assurances of the fair treatment either by "Dick Cheney or Tony Blair the Human Right activists are not convinced of the quality of treatments the al-Qaeda men are receiving in Guantanamo where the US military

be doubtlessly ex-post facto law which are repugnant to US constitution and article II of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Both of the documents prohibit the awarding of a heavier penalty upon the accused than the "one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed". The other legal snag pertains to the location itself. Guantanamo base actually belongs to the republic of Cuba. The US occupies it in defiance of the UNGA resolutions that have repeatedly directed her to restore the base to Cuba. Can the US hold the trial there without the permission of Cuba?

past several weeks in fending a wave of international outrage and diplomatic protest about its treatment of al-Qaeda and Taliban captives. Although an indignant Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld refuted most of the allegations which he attributed to "people who are either be informed, misinformed or poorly informed", there are signs of high level dissent within the administration. According to reports, secretary of state Colin Powell has asked president Bush to ensure that Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters captured in Afghanistan are treated according to international rules governing prisoners of war. Although

positive developments the scepticism persists. The world conscience is haunted by the atrocities perpetrated against the Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. The cold blooded massacre of 160 Taliban fighters by their captors in the presence of seven or eight American military personnel at Takht-Pol and the many slaughter of POWs at Qila-i Jangi in November last are the grime reminder of the limit to which the vengeance can run. During the same period 43 Taliban prisoners were transported in a sealed container in a three-day journey from Kunduz to Shibarghan resulting in their tragic death by suffocation. In a mass grave in Parwan 112 Taliban prisoners were found with their hands tied behind their back. All these horrendous facts constitute war crimes and crime against humanity perpetrated by Northern Alliance and the US invading forces.

Donald Rumsfeld's handling of the prisoner issue at Guantanamo, if not their treatment itself, has done much to ignite the international controversy. He first refused to provide a list of the prisoners, or the countries they are from, and several times suggested that he was unconcerned about their treatment and which he said was better than what they (the prisoners) had dealt out in Afghanistan.

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PERSPECTIVES

Donald Rumsfeld's handling of the prisoner issue at Guantanamo, if not their treatment itself, has done much to ignite the international controversy. He first refused to provide a list of the prisoners, or the countries they are from, and several times suggested that he was unconcerned about their treatment and which he said was better than what they (the prisoners) had dealt out in Afghanistan.

as the member of the armed forces and other militia and volunteer corps including members of the resistance movement belonging to a party to the conflict. But such militia and members of the organised resistance movement should be under the command of some one responsible for his men. They should bear a distinctive sign recognisable from a distance, carry arms openly and conduct the operations according to the laws and customs of war. In the light of the definition the Taliban and al-Qaeda men as well as Arab and Pakistani volunteers were fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Afghans under the banner of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

authorities have been holding the prisoners in six by eight cages covered with metal roof, razor-sharp chain link sides and concrete floor. The make-shift prison does not provide protection from wind, rain and cold. What toilet facilities and privacy could be available to the inmates of this mouse-trap is any one's guess.

These prisoners of undeterminate status would perhaps be tried by their captors, under the amended military law which denies them the right to engage a counsel of their choosing at the summary trial. Since the amended military regulation has been rewritten after the Taliban defeat, these would

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson holds the opinion that the detainees are lawful combatant since they belong to Taliban and al-Qaeda which were at war with the US. They are therefore protected by Geneva convention of 1949. She demanded that a competent tribunal, in accordance with the Geneva Convention, must determine the prisoners' legal status. Article 105 of the convention gives a prisoner of war the right to choose a qualified advocate to defend him at the trial and call witnesses.

This being the prevailing mood on prisoners' issue the Bush administration has been forced to spend

Powell's intervention seems to be to placate the allies' concerns, the hawks including Rumsfeld have started to acknowledge that the detainees cannot be designated as less lawful combatant without a legal process. Rumsfeld and other officials have, of late, offered some reassuring clarifications of their earlier position. Colin Powell has advised the administration that it is in the best interest of the US to initially treat the combatants captured in Afghanistan as prisoner of war. This is the view of other realists in the Pentagon, some of the US allies and the vast majority of international law and Human Rights groups.

Notwithstanding these flickers of

OPINION

Increase in dowry : Qualitative or quantitative change?

MONIRUL I KHAN

IN whatever name it was coined, dowry, demand system or the social mobility strategy, in essence it is a material or non-material transfer from a woman to a man in the negotiation of a marriage. It could be a non-material transfer (or social mobility in closer term) if a man negotiates an access to power structure in lieu of marrying a daughter of a highly placed father. The practice of dowry payment by a woman also indicates the existence of double exploitation of women, class and gender at a time. How? If structural adjustment policies accentuated the process of impoverishment victimising the man and woman equally the woman was further victimised by her class ally. Dr Siddiqi (Focus, DS, 19.2.02) rightly stressed the varying charac-

teristics of this social practice across time and space and the closer relationship with other social processes. In terms of relationship with other social variables sometimes it is an outcome (e.g., patriarchal domination, thus the subordinate status of women) and sometimes a springboard, particularly when it is linked with social mobility stated above. Dowry is also embedded deeply in gender structure, which in turn is also subject to class location. For example, dowry demand has been higher in the poorer class than in the others. However, there is a critical link between women's empowerment and the incidence of dowry payment. If it is true that with the enhancement of women's educational and economic status the pressure of dowry demand reduces, then the link becomes more real than apparent.

Dowry demand is a coping strategy for the impoverished peasant households. Historically dowry was embedded in both Hindu community and the peasant community in Bengal for structural reasons. As it was spirited by patriarchal dominance it also enabled Hindu women access to wealth which they were otherwise deprived of. Although it was a part of gender driven ideology the women themselves also subscribed it across religious and geographical divide. For example, a Muslim bride may view it as a seed capital for a household enterprise that she joins upon her marriage. Some anthropologists argued that it provided a status symbol to a bride in the competitive space of a household, in other words empowered her. A bride who brought dowry competed for higher status in the unequal household structure. From

the women's perspective who likes to see it as a means to access wealth it is linked to a redistribution of wealth. If it has increased with the material prosperity of society and accompanying inequality it has every possibility to perpetuate particularly if it has a positive effect on redistribution of wealth.

On closer examination it would be found that religious practitioners rooted the practice of dowry in some religious edict. It is also true that being an important source of passing normative strictures, no religious authority in Bangladesh ever spoke against this practice.

In the context of rural Bangladesh a strong force of pauperisation is at work, resulting in the increase of landless households stripping them of their assured subsistence. Increase in rural employment is still disproportionate to a very robust

supply side of the labour market. This might have some effect on the delaying marital age of the young men. It is also accompanied by speeded up rural-urban migration. Young women linger with their dependent status in peasant households. Resulting effect is increase in dowry demand in marriage negotiation as well as polygamy in sporadic manner.

The whole issue is strongly connected with the broader issue of women's empowerment. Latter brings multifarious effect including redefining women's role (e.g., remaining unmarried is not a curse), enhanced occupational status and bargaining capacity of women. We should turn our attention to two things: as a section the women have got further empowered in rural Bangladesh by the virtue of micro-credit and conscientisation

programmes, while very slow capitalist growth has turned into a pauperisation process reducing women's economic and other capacity. In my opinion quantitative increase in dowry is actually linked with the increasing vulnerability of a section of women, in other words weakening empowerment process. Thus it does not indicate a qualitative change as much a quantitative one. Material prosperity and increase in differentiation is not the single most important factor since in the capitalist west the above changes were accompanied by women's empowerment, which reduced their vulnerability to exploitative social forces to some extent.

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

Bangladesh Biman downgrades

Having flown a modest number of international carriers in four continents over the world, I have often seen and experienced the pleasure of getting upgraded to a higher class of travel while flying.

However, while flying to Dhaka from London by Bangladesh Biman this December and vice versa in January, I was awed, if not surprised, to find people of their Executive Business Class being 'downgraded' to Economy Class, the reason being that they had overbooked their J class section.

Although the mistake of overbooking is often done by a lot of 'A' grade airlines as well, they try their best to accommodate their passengers either in the same flight (if seats are available), or another

alternative flight. I was offered a downgrade from Business to Economy on the same flight, but thankfully, having pulled a few strings in the Biman management, I got back my seat in the J class; and then again, the flight was terrible. The service was bad, the flight crew were unfriendly, and the supposedly new 'Airbus' was almost in tatters! There was no in-flight entertainment whatsoever, and the personal televisions that are located in every seat were either out of order, or were never turned on during the 14 hour flight from Dhaka to London!

No wonder, Biman is more often than not referred to as 'Bey-iman' (without faith) by most passengers flying out from London. It's high time Biman authorities and the Civil Aviation Authorities did something about this ailing carrier.
Mehtab Rahman

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The starfish story

Dostoevsky once said that in his experience most people argued about things that they agree upon. It is the wording that they do not agree on. Similarly, I have always wondered in the same fashion looking at us Bangladeshis disagreeing, when in the grand scheme of things we all feel passionately for the country. I have to say that somewhere we lack the wisdom. It can be that we are perfectionists and all we need is a simple slip to say, "I told you so". Other wise why do we not have undisputed national heroes when we have such a distinct culture in place that goes back a millennium. Apart from our war heroes the only one I can remember is Titumeer. But a country needs living heroes to act

as a role model or be a Jateer Bibek. Another possibility for this fall out can be that we Bangladeshis are stark individualists where we equate acceptance of common ideas as a breach to our self-importance. Either way it is a waste of grand initiatives. We as a country have been quite fortunate to have a homogenous population. In this world of chaos of racial cleansing and axis of evil this homogeneity is a big advantage. We should use it by agreeing on some simple stuff. The following story should help.

A man was walking along the beach. The tide had gone out and left starfishes all over the sand. A little boy was seen throwing the starfish back into the ocean. The man asked the little boy what he was doing. The boy said he is throwing the starfish back into the ocean. "Little boy, don't you see all these

starfish, you can't make a difference." "I can make a difference for this one", he said as he threw the starfish into the ocean.

In our daily national life, along with the stories of scrounging sharks and stinging rays there are always some stories of saved starfishes around. We can start by acknowledging specific good deeds without being judgmental about the whole.

Judging is ok but the fact that the bad aftertaste of the judgement predisposing the mind is not acceptable. We should acknowledge the Awami League serving the full-term and successfully defending the gas export issue. We should laud BNP for the arrest of Pintu. We should acknowledge the work of President Sahahabuddin. We should acknowledge the BTB officer who



Bangladesh: Can we make a difference?

was beaten to his bones for creating a list of defaulters in Motiheel

Hasib Atlanta, USA