

The heinous act in India condemned

Let all concerned exercise calm and restraint

WE are deeply touched, anguished and outraged. The mindless mayhem has few parallels in the records of cruel and dastardly acts. Fiftysix railway passengers, 40 of them women and children were charred beyond recognition. The mix-up with the ashes of the burnt out metals of the Sabarmati Express compartments at Godhara station in the Indian state of Gujrat put a question-mark even on that high death figure. The coaches were locked up after heavy showers of stones upon them had panicked the inmates into immobility and then these were set afire to roast fellow human beings alive.

We mourn the deaths in neighbouring India and express our heart-felt condolences to the members of the bereaved families, the government of India and her people. Let us simultaneously record our condemnation of the pre-meditated, cowardly and patently heinous act in the strongest of language we are capable of decrying it.

Going by a commonly-held view, the coaches were targeted because they contained Hindu activists who were returning from the controversial Ayodhya site where BHP has threatened to construct Rama temple on March 15. The locality is also Muslim, so that simplistically, the needle of suspicion got pointed towards a particular community. If there is any prevarication in the versions making the rounds it will be hopefully exposed for what it is really. But the myth, as it were, stands dissolved even now by virtue of the highly responsible reactions from the Indian leadership and the media that refused to pander to any speculative finger-pointing. According to the District Collector of the area, as heard over the BBC, Bangla service, the ill-fated compartments had in them passengers of different religious persuasions. And the attackers were a mix of anti-social elements. In other words, no religious label should be put on either category of people.

On balance, it would appear that some circles in India may be up to whipping up public opinion or pressure around the Ram Mandir question prior to the Supreme Court verdict slated on March 15, on the very day the VHP has threatened to construct the Rama temple regardless of the purport of the court judgment. In fact, the vested quarters could be applying pressure tactics on the executive and the judiciary to soften the resistance against their militant religious agenda. So basically, some sinister elements are trying to subvert the legalistic and law enforcement processes.

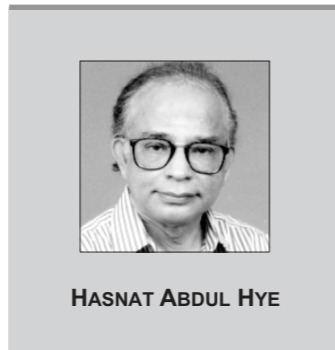
All the political parties in India have publicly and categorically affirmed their endorsement of the legal process adding that they solely relied on the Supreme Court to show the way. When India is looking up to the SC as the highest repository of the legal authority of the state to decide on the Ayodhya issue, Vishwa Hindu Parishad has had a different game-plan. They are spawning vulnerabilities around the old hump of volatility to politically capitalise on the same. However, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, being a component of the BJP, one wonders why the latter has allowed the former to grow into Frankenstein within its fold. It is time the BJP leadership reined in the ultra Hindutva elements; for it is likely that, pegged to the recent incidents, the VHP or RSS might grow more defiant and try to take law into their hands.

The top BJP leaders have been verbally correct so far; sometimes even stern in their pronouncements against people out to crush communal harmony but have been found rather short on action, even indulgent of VHP-RSS extremism.

We have a four-fold appeal to make under the circumstances: one part goes out to the Muslims urging them not to be provoked into losing their composure; the second part is directed to sensible Hindu elements throughout India to exert their influence on the handful of extremist mavericks; the third one is for all political parties and civil society bodies to bring their collective clout to bear on the question of maintaining a secularist balance in the Indian society; and last but not the least, the government of India must deal with the phenomenon with an iron hand.

As India awaits Supreme Court verdict on the Ayodhya issue, comments of intimidating and precipitous nature need to be scrupulously avoided by all concerned. The situation better not be allowed to go out of hand; for, if it did so, the costs would be too heavy for India as well as the region to bear.

IMF's end game



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

IMF has tightened the screw on Bangladesh. If the member-client has not yielded to pressure it is not because of sheer cussedness or a false sense of pride. Bangladesh is in desperate need of a bail out from the present fiscal imbalance and the balance of payment problem. But it cannot accept terms for assistance that are beyond the pale.

The fourth IMF mission in less than four months has left without reaching an agreement. According to newspaper reports the discussion foundered on two issues mainly. IMF wants a cut in ADP by Taka 6000 to 7000 and would like to see Taka freely float in the market. Its all other conditions for downsizing, privatization and reducing public expenditure were more or less accepted by the government. The Finance Minister has told the nation bluntly that it would have to bite the bullet to come around the present economic malaise. His free and frank declarations did not mince words and were not mere public relations exercises. As an astute champion of economic reforms his achievements are already on record. In fact he initiated the process of economic reforms in the country during his previous stint as Finance Minister. He knows the compulsions of structural adjustment of the economy and the price tag attached to it for the same. Even without IMF prodding and pressure he would surely have picked up the reform process where it was left off. Unfortunately, the momentum was lost during the intervening years and

the reform agenda was more or less placed on the back burner. Neither on scaling back public sectors expenditures nor on divestment of public enterprises there was visible progress. On the contrary, public borrowing reached record heights and public sector enterprises continued to suffer from financial hemorrhage due to chronic loss. The management of foreign exchange was haphazard and ad hoc. One after another grandiose schemes were taken up throwing all consideration of priority to the four winds.

The policy is not to wait till the accident happens. The present strategy is to try to nip the crisis in the bud. To that end a whole range of sophisticated oversight and monitoring procedures has been put in place. On the basis of this early warning system it is not difficult to flag the countries that are at imminent or likely risk of financial crisis. Obviously IMF failed to monitor the economic trends in Bangladesh adequately, diligently and timely. At least that is the general perception.

percent must appear as the maximum possible. Pushing it beyond this limit would make a mockery of planned development based on a comprehensive policy strategy to promote sustained growth and reduce poverty over the medium term a goal supposedly high in the agenda of IMF. Retrenchment of public sector employees has to be staggered on practical considerations. New taxes or enhanced rates can be imposed only through the budgetary instrument. All these take some time.

The ensuing chaos and credit crunch would undoubtedly deepen balance of payments crisis further. In the medium term the crisis can be controlled if the central Bank has an inflation target to guide monetary policy. But the short-term havoc of inflationary pressure can render this possibility more or less theoretical. The decision to disagree with the IMF in respect of foreign exchange regime should be seen in the context of these possibilities, real and imagined.

Short and medium term plans for

IN MY VIEW

It is pure common sense that a sick body becomes sicker unless attended to timely. Caught in the maelstrom of a severe crisis Bangladesh economy is crying out for rescue measures. IMF has turned almost a deaf ear to its case. Naturally, criticism being insensitive and harsh will be hard to brush aside.

Was the above dismal picture of the economy unknown to the IMF? The present crisis did not burst out of the blue overnight. With its system of monitoring economic trends in use, what was the IMF doing during all these years? Surely it was not oblivious of the fact that prevention is better than cure? But there is nothing publicly known about IMF's efforts or initiative to stem the rot. If Bangladesh is guilty of financial profligacy and macro-economic mismanagement IMF cannot exonerate itself from failure to exercise due diligence. It failed to warn in time and use pressure. Half of the energy, time and initiative that have been invested by it now could prevent the economy from sliding downward. It is a great puzzle why IMF did not put pressure earlier to bring the economy back on track?

It can be argued that IMF, like a doctor, can prescribe medicine only after the ailment strikes and the patient comes calling at his chamber. This used to be the case in the past. IMF got wiser from experience of financial meltdown in one country after another. Now a days

According to conventional wisdom a new government is in a relatively advantageous position regarding implementation of reform measures. It can take new initiatives and even measures that may not be popular. With the next election far and away it need not adopt a populist script for action. The present government of Bangladesh has given enough indication that it will not flinch from taking measures to rid the country of bloated bureaucracy and liabilities of bleeding public sector enterprises. It has also announced measures to streamline the banking sector. But there are limits to such reforms, particularly in the short term. For instance, because of continuity of development schemes in the ADP and sunk investment drastic cut in the ADP is not possible. Faced with resource constraint and the need to put a lid on fiscal deficit the government has finally settled with a Tk. 2571 crore cut in the ADP. Earlier the government undertook the first pruning exercise but could barely shed Tk.1082 crores. The present cut of development budget by around 14

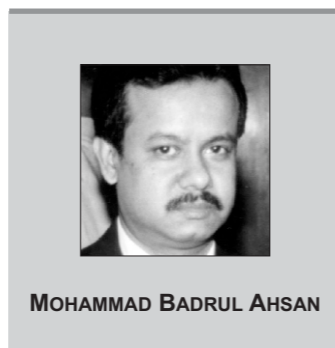
As regards the choice of foreign-exchange regime the reluctance to accept the IMF prescription of a 'free-float' is understandable. At present Taka is pegged to a basket of currencies denominated in dollar. Under this exchange rate regime the government decides on the exchange rate keeping the balance of payment in view. The rate is sought to be kept competitive through suitable devaluation in case the price of exportable rise because of inflation and fiscal deficit. IMF does not consider this as an adequate and satisfactory mechanism and has recommended a freely floating exchange rate i.e. complete deregulation. A more competitive exchange rate determined by the market forces rather than by administrative fiat would be the best way for Bangladesh out of the chronic balance of payments crisis and offers the best buffer against external economic shocks. Unfortunately, floating the taka entails substantial risks. Left to the market the price of taka may fall precipitously. The depreciation may be too much causing uncontrollable infla-

implementation with time bound schedules can be the basis of objectively verifying implementation item by item. The standby loan facility could be made available to Bangladesh on the basis of such a plan of implementation. This loan being meant to assist countries overcome a crisis in the short term should not have been so rigidly surrounded with conditionalities that can only be fulfilled in the medium term. It is unfair to thrust these on a government which has just assumed office and is confronted with a financial crisis not of its own making. Stern and unsympathetic attitude by IMF can only give rise to criticism of the government for failing to address the problems urgently. This will make implementation of major reforms in future even more difficult. IMF should regard helping Bangladesh now as similar to pump priming with smoother operation in future propelled by internal force. Working in tandem with the World Bank it can use both the carrot and the stick after the initial shot in the arm. There is little risk of its being upstaged by maneuvers if it uses the new strat-

egy pragmatically but firmly. The fourth IMF mission left earlier than was scheduled. Having failed to force upon Bangladesh all the conditionalities for the standby loan facility particularly those relating to drastic ADP cut and free float of Taka it is now almost certain that the loan will not be made available to Bangladesh. According to newspaper reports another mission will come in July to resume negotiation. By that time the new budget will be made public and with it the details of reform programmes for the short and medium term. The stage will then be set for availing of loan under the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). This is the scenario for which IMF wants to wait. It is an irony that fund for economic restructuring would be available under the rubric of poverty reduction. Why can't IMF (and the Bank) call a spade a spade e.g. Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) rather than replacing it by PRSP? But nomenclature is not the main point at issue. It is the sense of urgency and timeliness of assistance that matter. If and when the loan under PRSP is made available the Bangladesh economy reeling under the present financial crisis may not be in the healthiest of condition to make optimum use of that facility. This failure will not be for lack of sincerity and serious commitment but because of the fragility and vulnerability of the economy to internal and external shocks. It is pure common sense that a sick body becomes sicker unless attended to timely. Caught in the maelstrom of a severe crisis Bangladesh economy is crying out for rescue measures. IMF has turned almost a deaf ear to its case. Naturally, criticism being insensitive and harsh will be hard to brush aside.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

Man, woman and chameleon



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE dislocation had begun with the partition of India, although she was not even born when it happened. Yet the political upheavals would be lodged in her mind like the fault lines of an earthquake. She trudged through the wretched traction of a bifurcated existence as her body lived in the new country and her soul roamed in the old homeland. She compared her fate to that of a demon in the fairytales whose body lived on earth, and soul remained hidden inside a parrot trapped in a cage under an ocean.

She grew up hearing about the lost homeland from her grandmother in whose sighs blew the winds from that distant land. She grew up hearing about a country she had never seen, its soil kneaded in the wrinkles of her grandmother's face. She could even smell its foliage in her grandmother's breath, and by the time she turned into an adolescent, she could hear the uproar of history in her blood.

It was that uproar which had convinced the grandmother not to raise another woman in the house.

Women suffer in all innocence for the madness of men, she said again and again when the granddaughter was born. She dressed the little girl like a boy, and introduced her to neighbours and strangers with a male name. She regularly cropped her hairs to renew the edict that the granddaughter was going to grow up like a man. This is how the dislocation began.

One day the granddaughter's body came to the crossroads of identity, its surface swelling and depressing like the topography of a

ever they brought the tape to measure her chest, waist and crotch. The grandmother assured that those hazards of imitating men were nothing compared to what she could suffer as a woman living in the covetous lust of man's imagination.

The granddaughter lived as a man while the grandmother repeatedly recounted the story of the partition. The granddaughter learned the death of her grandfather by heart; every twitch of his pain recorded in her memory as the grandmother laid its description in

would be fixed on her until the last moment before the spurt of blood sprayed his face and covered the eyes like a coat of paint. They dragged his body to the courtyard, while it was still trembling under the impact of flushing life, and set it on fire.

That night while the fire consumed her man, the fire of those men, who killed him, burned till dawn. Her grandmother took a pause at this point of her story, biting her lips as if to hold back a gathering storm. For the first time in her life

daughter to leave the shelter of her body. She argued that lust lurked in the body, while love lived in the soul. She talked about the partition, repeated her story of the riots in Calcutta, recounted the brutal killing of her husband, and the horror of that night, which had burned all the sensitive buds in her body and soul.

The granddaughter decided to marry that man anyhow and started to reverse her body as if a gender machine started to spin backward unwinding its magic. Then one day she disappeared and could not be

came running on her nervous feet. She looked at the flames and knew already that destiny had closed its circle. Forty years after that dreadful night, death and dishonour converged in the flames of yet another conflagration that took another body with its soul.

In the hospital, the granddaughter told the police that the man she loved took her to a house where a gang of men was waiting for them. He told others that he had brought with him a freak of nature, a man who had turned into a woman, and asked them to be quick before she changed her mind and became a man again.

Then she said that the uproar of history in her blood had finally overwhelmed her mind. The partition of India and perfidy of men had dislocated her family, and she had seen none of that. But the betrayal of her love made it all happen in her own life all over again. If her soul was previously separated from the body, what happened during those two nights permanently exiled it in there.

Chameleons feed on light and air, she said, and she fed herself on fire and smoke. Her soul wished to depart from the body, not to return to it ever again. With those words she fell asleep and the woman, who was listed in the hospital records under a man's name, never regained her consciousness.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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terrain shaken by earthquakes. She would be busy hiding the signs of change in her body like a criminal destroying incriminating evidence. She flattened her breasts with a chest band, avoided wearing make-ups, and picked up male mannerisms and vocabularies. She learned how to graze the middle finger and the thumb against each other to produce that snapping sound of male arrogance, and then to blow a whistle with those same two fingers placed between her lips in a circular formation.

Soon she would be like an actress who started to live in her role. But she occasionally fumbled on her choice of public toilets and flustered at tailoring shops when-

the grooves of her brain like the wires of an electric connection. One night during the riots in Calcutta, armed men broke into the house and pinned her grandfather to the floor. Some of them held down his head on the ground, while their leader motioned his sword back and forth with great efforts as if to cut a man's ties with his life was not an easy task.

The grandfather was looking in the direction of his wife as the sword sank in his throat. The skin opened to a thin layer of flesh, which opened to the cartilage of the larynx, and then to a yawning slit while the scream of death sputtered into a drawn-out sound of air being sucked out of a hollow space. His gaze

she had woken up to a morning when the sun looked sad and embarrassed, shining over the corpse, which was lying in the courtyard like a clumsy clod of charred materials.

Forty years after the partition, the granddaughter came home one day and broke in tears. She claimed that it was suffocating inside the body, which was no longer connected to the soul. She liked a young man in her group and her body craved to reconcile with that desire in her soul. The tamarind yearned for the palate, the gasoline for the fire, and the wax for its flame, the grandmother thought.

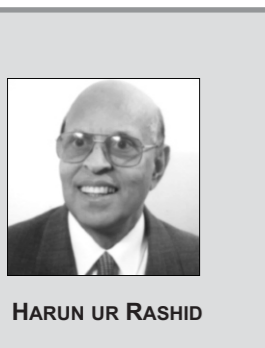
The grandmother cautioned that it would be a mistake for her grand-

found for two days in a row. On the morning of the third day, neighbors found her aimlessly walking near the neighbourhood mosque, her short man-like hair disheveled, her face and lips bruised, her clothes tattered and stained with blood.

She refused to speak to anyone, went to her room and shut the door behind her. Just after the sun crossed the mid-sky, she screamed in her room, which was lit up with the glow of fire. By the time family members gathered and broke the door, she was badly burned and rolling on the floor.

The grandmother was in a daze, when she heard the screams and

Saudi Crown Prince intervenes in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute



HARUN UR RASHID

BOTTOM LINE

Israel and Palestine are fated to live as neighbours. There is no alternative to it. The sooner Israel agrees to withdraw its occupation from the West Bank and the Golan Heights, the better is for Israel's future. A proposal from the Saudi Crown Prince will have to be taken seriously by all parties. The most complex dispute in the Middle East may find a way to get it resolved through the initiative of Crown Prince Abdullah ibn Abdul Aziz al Saud.

AS the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts escalates with no apparent sign of diminishing violence on each other, diplomatic peace initiatives are also in a full gear. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres of Israel discussed peace formula with French President on 26 February. Javier Solana, EU Chief for foreign affairs had been on a visit on 25th February to Israel and Palestine to talk to the leaders. However of all the peace proposals, Crown Prince Abdullah's peace deal attracted the most attention.

His proposal is simple and not a new one. The significance of the proposal is that it has emanated from Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Naturally a consider-

able weight is thrown to it. His proposal is that in return for a total withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines and establishment of a Palestinian state, the 22 members of the Arab League will offer Israel full diplomatic relations, normalise trade and security guarantees. Media reports indicated that the proposal had not been formally articulated and was likely to be aired formally at the Arab League Summit at Beirut on March 27-28. The proposal was being talked about in private among many Arab leaders.

Mr. Solana told a press conference in Israel on 26 February that he was rushing to meet the Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia to get the

core elements of his proposal. Meanwhile Israel, Palestine Authority, USA and other Arab countries had reportedly given positive signals to the proposal.

The proposal means that Israel has to withdraw from East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Israeli Prime Minister Sharon at one stage vowed not to withdraw fully from the two places. The other difficult issue of return of Palestinian refugees to Israel does not seem to be included in the proposal. Furthermore the Arab world realises that they have to recognise the existence of Israel in the Middle East. A peaceful co-existence between Israel and Arab countries seems to be the order of

the day.

Syria appears to be closely watching the situation since the withdrawal of Israelis from the Golan Heights is one of the pre-conditions to peace with Israel. Syria's new young President Bashar al Assad wants his country to be open to modern technology and Western investment. Once this issue is settled, Syria may play a greater positive role in the region. It may be mentioned that Syria is close to Iranian leadership and this relationship could be fully exploited so that the region becomes stable.

Crown Prince Abdullah is the defacto ruler of the Kingdom. He is known to be an Arab nationalist and

a person of great integrity and honesty. He has a large following both inside and outside the Saudi Arabian kingdom. He was cool in allowing Saudi Arabia as a launch pad for US war on terrorism in Afghanistan and this was noted by all Arab nationalists.

Although Saudi Arabia will not be involved in negotiations with Israel pursuant to the peace proposal, Palestine representatives have to sit with Israelis to work out the plan. Furthermore the US has to encourage both parties to be on the table to negotiate how and when the Saudi proposal can take concrete shape.

Israel and Palestine are fated to live as neighbours. There is no alternative to it. The sooner Israel agrees to withdraw its occupation from the West Bank and the Golan Heights, the better is for Israel's future. A proposal from the Crown Prince will have to be taken seriously by all parties. The most complex dispute in the Middle East may find a way to get it resolved through the initiative of Crown Prince Abdullah ibn Abdul Aziz al Saud.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Sock it to Iraq, George

TERRY JONES

TO prevent terrorism by dropping bombs on Iraq is such an obvious idea that I can't think why no one has thought of it before. It's so simple. If only the UK had done something similar in Northern Ireland, we wouldn't be in the mess we are in today. The moment the IRA blew up the Horseguards' bandstand, the government should have declared its own War on Terrorism. It should have immediately demanded that the Irish government hand over Gerry Adams. If they refused to do so -- or quibbled about needing proof of his guilt -- we could have told them that this was no time for prevarication and that they must hand over not only Adams but all IRA terrorists in the Republic. If they tried to stall by claiming that it was hard to tell who were IRA terrorists and who weren't, because they don't go around wearing identity badges, we would have been free to send in the bombers.

It is well known that the best way of picking out terrorists is to fly 30,000ft above the capital city of any state that harbours them and drop bombs -- preferably cluster bombs. It is conceivable that the bombing of Dublin might have provoked some sort of protest, even if just from James Joyce fans, and there is at least some likelihood of increased anti-British sentiment in what remained of the city and thus in the numbers of potential terrorists. But this, in itself, would have justified the tactic of bombing them in the first place. We would have nipped them in the bud, so to speak. I hope you follow the argument.

Having bombed Dublin and, perhaps, a few IRA training bogs in Tipperary, we could not have afforded to be complacent. We would have had to turn our attention to those states which had supported and funded the IRA terrorists through all these years. The main provider of funds was, of course, the USA, and this would have posed us with a bit of a problem. Where to bomb in America? It's a big place and it's by no means certain that a small country like the UK could afford enough bombs to do the whole job. It's going to

cost the US billions to bomb Iraq and a lot of that is empty countryside. America, on the other hand, provides a bewildering number of targets.

Should we have bombed Washington, where the policies were formed? Or should we have concentrated on places where Irishmen are known to lurk, like New York, Boston and Philadelphia? We could have bombed any police station and fire station in most major urban centres, secure in the knowledge that we would be taking out significant numbers of IRA sympathisers. On St Patrick's Day, we could have bombed Fifth Avenue and scored a bull's-eye.

In those American cities we couldn't afford to bomb, we could have rounded up American citizens with Irish names, put bags over their heads and flown them in chains to Guernsey or Rockall, where we could have given them food packets marked 'My Kind of Meal' and exposed them to the elements with a clear conscience.

The same goes for Australia. There are thousands of people in Sydney and Melbourne alone who have actively supported Irish republicanism by sending money and good wishes back to people in the Republic, many of whom are known to be IRA members and sympathisers. A well-placed bomb or two Down Under could have taken out the ringleaders and left the world a safer place. Of course, it goes without saying that we would also have had to bomb various parts of London such as Camden Town, Lewisham and bits of Hammersmith and we should certainly have had to obliterate, if not the whole of Liverpool, at least the Scotland Road area.

And that would be it really, as far as exterminating the IRA and its supporters. Easy. The War on Terrorism provides a solution so uncomplicated, so straightforward and so gloriously simple that it baffles me why it has taken a man with the brains of George W. Bush to think of it.

So sock it to Iraq, George. Let's make the world a safer place.

Courtesy: The Observer