

## Bleeding Palestine may breed endless violence

*It's about to create a situation that even the US may fail to control*

THE violence cycle continues to escalate in Palestine and there are reasons to believe that this is now going seriously out of control. Suicide bombing by Palestinian radical groups as well as retaliatory attacks by the Israeli troops have pushed the death and murder toll in the area very high. Sadly the capacity of the world to be able to ignore such violence seems to have increased as well. Apart from well meaning noises, it's obvious that the tolerance threshold for violence in the region has been stretched to accommodate even greater blood letting. As of now the world doesn't look as if it will take any meaningful action to stop and walk towards peace.

Yet this comes at a time when there is a peace outline that is circulating around the corridors of power in the Middle East. The "Saudi Peace Plan" has also received the endorsement of the US as well as a number of other countries. It has also received a few rejections by some of the Middle Eastern powers and Israel has shown little enthusiasm for it either. But at least in this grim environment, it's a spark that had gladdened many hearts sick of violence there and raised hopes which may again be dashed now.

As long as violence continues, it will generate more disquiet and destruction. The emergence of Israeli extremist groups was inevitable and they will soon become a major factor in Israeli politics. It's true they will not be condemned as a Middleeast extremist group and the western press will not demonise them as they do the Hamas and Islamic Jihad but that doesn't reduce the chances of destabilization in the region. The situation is getting more beyond control if that is possible.

The casualty in the entire process is moderation. While it looks as if the Israeli forces have territorial control, and Arafat is at bay; in reality, this extremely unusual situation is not sustainable and time will certainly run out before dead bodies do. This is what needs to be recognised.

The Afghan victory has given peace initiatives a bad name and the pro-Israeli lobby has pushed everyone out of the moral high ground into the whirlpool of international hostility. But what is possible for the US to sustain may not be for the rest of the world including its closest allies.

The Palestine situation must be diffused because the network of violence that is sparked by endless hostilities can't be eradicated through occupation. Much of Laden's rage was sourced in the Israeli-Arab conflict. It's in the interest of the world and the US as well that a peace, even a flawed one, must be shaped immediately. Looked through the eyes of the Middle East policy, the world looks very unsafe indeed.

## Fire in Old Dhaka

*Unheeded lessons and bigger damages*

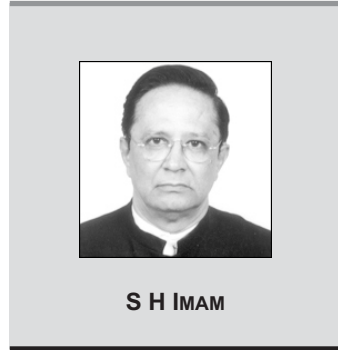
THE Islambagh fire incident on Tuesday was the most devastating that inhabitants of old Dhaka have seen in 30 years. Density of people and the structures around them had much to do with the scale of damage. The losses should not be calculated in monetary terms even though someone has tried to quantify it at Tk 20 crore. For, there has been an incalculable damage to possessions that took years to build but were burned in a jiffy.

Yes, by a sheer stroke of luck, only injuries have been sustained and reported and not any fatalities as such; there were no third degree burns among the 15 wounded and hospitalised. Nevertheless, it has been a human disaster of some scale. Four thousand tin-shed hovels were burned to ashes and five thousand families destituted by the fire that did not stop short within the slum area. Rather it spread further out damaging residential buildings and gutting shops and some small plastic and chemical factory units.

Where is the strategy to tackle the escalatory dangers of fire, especially in the sardine-packed parts of the still haphazardly growing city? We have made a name for presenting ourselves with *fait accomplis* rather than taking charge of things early in the day to head them off. We then handle the 'problems' -- largely of our own making -- with a clumsy nervousness, our sure-fire way of raising the level of damages in the end. The fire fighting strategy should have both preventive and management elements. First, the messages about fire and the precautions to avoid it should be driven home to slum areas where people have radio and television sets these days. Fire extinguishers will have to be set up at appropriate points having regard to the construction of access roads. Dwellers in congested areas better try and keep at least one access road free for emergency use.

We think it is imperative for the fire fighting authority in the cities to keep a route chart to inner city quarters handy. Also they should perhaps try to redraw the operational roadmap, if there is one, and use by-passes to circuitous routes where possible.

# India's secular credentials under severe strain



S H IMAM

THE Gujarat communal riots have been a blot on Indian secularism. That the BJP's rise to political power was inherently anti-secularist is borne out today by facts. Narendra Modi, the chief minister of the BJP-led state government, has claimed success in quelling the disturbances within 72 hours of their breaking out.

Yes, after curfews in six cities in Gujarat, at least five hundred deaths in Muslim quarters (by official estimates), the urban centres wore a calmer look, but the picture has been vastly different in the minority pockets of the countryside where Muslims fell helpless victims to the rioters' wrath.

The fact that the other states have not yet been caught up in the

frenzy reflects credibly on the state government's vigilance, good sense of the people and perhaps on the equations between the various political parties at those levels. The central government's role must have been minimal there, because law and order, even in its extraordinary dimension is a state subject.

What triggered the inter-communal violence was a minor tiff, and therefore, a manageable one at its origin. As the Sabarmati Express pulled up at Godhara station Hindu activists returning from the sensitive Ayodhya location bought tea apparently from Muslim vendors but would not allegedly pay for it. This led to an altercation, hurling of stones at the railway carriage they were on, locking up of its doors and setting the compartment afire.

It was learnt on the authority of the district administrator that neither all the snuffed out passengers were Hindu nor the attackers were all

## JUST ANOTHER VIEW

India's present leadership will have to fall back on those Nehruvian or Gandhian days to re-vitalize the state's commitment to communal co-existence amidst the heterogeneity of the Indian society.

Muslim. Yet quickly a religious colour was put to it and what happened next was a butchery of innocent Muslims who even remotely did not have anything to do with the Godhara massacre. They have had to pay the price for a law and order situation that took four and a half hours of police inaction to turn ugly. Then a question-mark could also be put on the belated deployment of armed forces.

The riots have been dubbed as the worst since the communal carnage at the partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947. Even the 1992 communal violence following the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya pales before the latest round of riots in that south-western state of India.

This has happened not as a direct backlash from the temple issue unlike the turn of events seen in 1992. The Godhara incident could at best be linked to a rather simmer-

ing prelude to the VHP's temple construction agenda of March 15. If this is a foretaste of what is to come following the VHP's rolling of the temple juggernaut construction material to the Ayodha site, then God help the Muslims.

But it seems as something of a countervailing development that the riots may have somewhat whetted the appetite of extremism among the Viswa Hindu Parishad, RSS and Bajrangdal elements. Or may be the government has had a powerful handle in the riots to be more assertive with the Hindu militants asking them to behave. In all, what has happened is that they are taking the path to negotiation with the Muslim community leaders.

Two concurrent developments centring around the VHP's threatened construction of a permanent Rama temple in the disputed Ayodhya site has caught our antenna. In the first overture, we

hear Asoke Singair, the secretary general of the Bharatiya Hindu Parishad (VHP) favouring a symbolic construction of a Rama temple on the periphery of the disputed site. A central government spokesman also hinted at the possibility of a 'superfluous' access being given to the VHP. On another level, and this underlines the negotiation mode more forcefully, Kanchi Acharya, a man acceptable to the Hindu elements, has had talks with the leaders of the Muslim Personal Law Board in a bid to strike a last-minute compromise. The Hindu extremists have so far put faith or the religious moral before the court insofar as deciding the question of access to *Ram Jannabhumi* went. Now that their leaders seem to regard the site as disputed after all, and are willing also to have the temple outside the controversial swathe of land in Ayodha sound rather conciliatory. But we have to wait and see on that.

The essential thing to realise is, beneath the crust, if you like, of working relations between the majority and minority communities in India lurks somewhere at the sub-conscious level a communal streak that is inherently vulnerable to snow-balling.

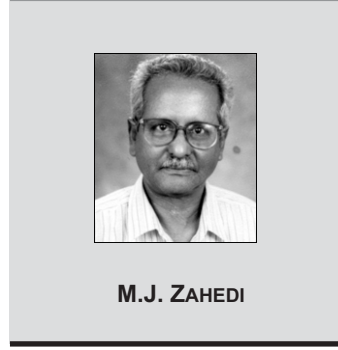
In 1947, Pandit Nehru lunged out of his car in New Delhi in a fit of anger seeing a crowd of Hindu zealots chasing some Muslims to kill them, and with a baton in hand he went around beating them up and yelling, 'Stop it, stop it'. Mahatma Gandhi's fast-unto-death role in Calcutta and Noakhali helped curb the riots in those two places in 1946.

India's present leadership will have to fall back on those Nehruvian or Gandhian days to re-vitalize the state's commitment to communal co-existence amidst the heterogeneity of the Indian society.

Perhaps if Indian citizens take the latest riot cases to the courts like the Sikhs had done after the reprisal on them in New Delhi in the wake of Indira Gandhi's murder by their co-religionist, the minority rights will be vindicated for a better future of all Indians.

SH Imam is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

# None of BJP's tactics paid it off in Hindi heartland



M.J. ZAHEDI

RESULTS of the election in four Indian states were the major subject of display and comment in the local Press last week. All the papers carried the news quite extensively, they published editorial page special articles and some of them carried editorial comments as well.

All the papers said that the polls spell a disaster for the Vajpayee government. The two slogans on which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had based its election strategy, viz. threat to national security and Ram Mandir, could not help it save its last fortress of power in the Hindi heartland. The opposition's campaign, on the other hand, was based on the government's failure to solve the people's problems and on the assumption that the people have rejected the politics of hatred, intolerance and chauvinism. It also encouraged communal forces to

deflect attention from its incompetence and corruption.

The BJP's defeat in Uttar Pradesh was the most noticeable feature of the results. The state has been the bastion of BJP's power. In the outgoing House of 403 seats, BJP had 174, which now has been reduced to 107. Its main rival parties have increased their support: Samajwadi Party and Bahujana Samajwadi Party have bagged 144 and 99 seats respectively against their previous tallies of 110 and 67.

The battle for UP was crucial for the BJP because of Ayodhya where its close allies (Viswa Hindu Parishad (or VHP), Rastriya Sevak Sagh (or RSS) and Bajrang Dal) plan to construct Ram Mandir on the site of the Babri Masjid which was demolished by a Hindu mob in 1992 when BJP was in power in the state. VHP launched a nationwide campaign to start construction of the mosque on the site of the mosque or very close to it. However, seeing the campaign backfire, the BJP govern-

## LETTER FROM KARACHI

'Prime Minister Vajpayee faces the most difficult test of his political power. If the BJP fails to rein in its militant Hindu factions and to provide a sense of security to its minorities, the circle of inter-communal hostilities could spread throughout the country and will surely have grave consequences for the entire South Asian region'.

ment at the centre disassociated with the plan.

Vajpayee has of course asserted that the outcome of state elections would carry no significance for the national government. His cabinet colleagues however staked the country's security on it: they said that a negative verdict would carry a wrong message to Pakistan, which, taking it as a sign of division among Indians, might view the Vajpayee government incapable of acting firmly in the current Pakistan-India standoff.

BJP had based its election campaign on emotive issues of national security and anti-terrorism. The elections coincided with the largest ever build-up of Indian forces on Pakistan borders. Vajpayee himself led the anti-Pakistan campaign and his speeches at public rallies were laced with threatening rhetoric. The Ram temple bogey was resurrected to attract the majority Hindu vote. But none of these tactics paid off. Defeat is particularly glaring in all

the three states where BJP was in power --- in UP, Uttaranchal and Punjab. To forestall the post-election situation, which indeed is dismal, Vajpayee had said that the polls were not a referendum on his coalition at the centre. Constitutionally that may be so. But the manner and the margin of the BJP drubbing must be unnerving even for a wily politician like him. Atal land now is confined only to five states: Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh which BJP runs, Jharkhand where it has a chief minister and Haryana and Orissa where it rules through alliances.

Although the voting pattern showed an anti-incumbency trend, it would be too simplistic to attribute the BJP's defeat to this trend alone. A more revealing aspect of the poll results is the rise of the Congress and other parties campaigning for secularism and communal harmony, as opposed to the BJP's agenda influenced by the Jan Sangh. The Samajwadi Party, a champion of the lower castes, has

emerged as the single largest party in UP. The BSP of Mulayam Singh Yadav, who has strong support among Muslims of UP, has also made major gains. As it is likely to have its chief ministers in Punjab and Uttaranchal also, it may be said that the opposition, especially Sonia Gandhi and her allies, are moving closer to occupying the centre stage in national politics also.

The BJP now ought to learn the right lesson. People of the Hindi belt, a traditional BJP stronghold, have rejected its grand strategic design and religion-based politics.

The futility of amassing forces and weapons to browbeat Pakistan is now evident, as the Indian voter is more concerned with local politics and more interested in the promotion of social justice and development at home, rather than taking pride in military prowess and nuclear weapons.

Vajpayee has of course threatened to resign if VHP does not give up its plans of building the Ram

Mandir. According to *The Nation*, it is the first sign of sanity to emerge out of India for some time and has raised hopes that perhaps better sense might prevail in connection with the Pakistan-India confrontation on the borders. Even if Vajpayee's purpose is to win Muslim votes, it still is a welcome positive gesture. If we witness more of the same, it will be of great benefit to the region and the world, *The Nation* said.

*Dawn*, however, was not so sure; it said that it may be too early to say how adversely the poll results will affect the fortunes of the coalition politics at the centre, but it has been a serious setback for the BJP, particularly because by common consensus the election results could be called 'anti-BJP'.

Referring to the Hindu communalists' threat to build a temple at the site of the demolished mosque, *The News* in an editorial comment, 'India on edge', said: 'Prime Minister Vajpayee faces the most difficult test of his political power. If the BJP fails to rein in its militant Hindu factions and to provide a sense of security to its minorities, the circle of inter-communal hostilities could spread throughout the country and will surely have grave consequences for the entire South Asian region'.

M J Zahedi is an eminent columnist in Pakistan and formerly the Editor of the *Khaleez Times*.

# The unforgivable murder of Daniel Pearl

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED  
*writes from Princeton*

THE murder of an innocent human being is a despicable crime in any religion. The act is especially heinous if the person is murdered primarily BECAUSE he belongs to a particular religion. By all accounts, that is what happened to *The Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. Danny Pearl was murdered, somewhere around Karachi, Pakistan, because he belonged to the Jewish faith. The fact that his murderers profess to belong to the same faith as the writer makes him furious, because, frankly, I see no resemblance between the compassionate faith that I practice and the murderous one they purport to.

Based in India, Daniel Pearl was *Wall Street Journal's* South Asia Bureau Chief. Like the brilliant reporter he was, Pearl, investigating the saga of the British shoe bomber Richard Reid, thought he was on to something. What he thought was a lead, was actually a trap. The primary motive of Pearl's abductors was to kidnap an American, any American. It is conjectured that the religious fanatics in Pakistan

## LETTER FROM AMERICA

It did not matter to the barbaric terrorists that Daniel Pearl's only interest was to pursue a lead that could result in a scoop for his newspaper. The fact that he was American was probably not going to cost him his life. As soon as the murderers found out that Pearl was Jewish American, his fate was sealed... In his wildest nightmare could Pearl have imagined that in this day and age his birth into a Jewish family was going to be the sole reason for his premature death at the hands of the terrorists? What a sad commentary on the times we live in!

wanted to get back at President Pervez Musharraf for his crackdown against them, by embarrassing him with such acts. Very quickly the abductors pronounced Pearl an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Aware that such accusations (that a journalist is a member of the intelligence agency) could be deadly, a couple of years ago the US journalists had asked the intelligence agencies of the nation never to entertain the thought of using journalists as agents.

Then the episode took an ominous turn. Upon learning that Pearl was Jewish, his abductors changed their accusation, and called him a

Mossad agent. As soon as I heard of their new labeling of Pearl, I was alarmed. It was heartbreaking to watch and hear Pearl's pregnant wife Mariane plead with and beg the kidnappers to spare the life of her husband, in exchange of her own life, if necessary. Unfortunately, she might as well have been pleading with statues made of stone. Taking a human life is of no consequence to these murderers. Unable to take the moral high road and get back at the high and the mighty, they take the low road and derive pleasure in murdering the innocent and the weak.

Danny Pearl was not a Mossad

agent. I know, because I see Mossad agents all the time on American television, pushing the interests of Israel ahead of the US's. A Mossad agent does not go to Pakistan with his wife. A Mossad agent does not follow a blind lead, go to a restaurant in Karachi all alone, and put himself in a situation where he may be kidnapped. A Mossad agent does not get himself killed in Pakistan. To accuse Daniel Pearl of being an agent of the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad, is no different than accusing any Irishman of being an IRA-sympathizer, any Italian of belonging to the Mafia, any German of being a Nazi, or any

Arab of being a terrorist! Daniel Pearl's murder reminds me of the Columbine High School massacre of a few years ago. The teenage white murderers told a black student the reason why they were killing him (because he was a "nigger!") before shooting him dead. The devilish punks told the petrified black boy that unlike other murders they were committing, their murder of him was not a random act; violence was specifically directed at him because of who he was, a black, a "nigger!"

It did not matter to the barbaric terrorists that Daniel Pearl's only interest was to pursue a lead that

could result in a scoop for his newspaper. The fact that he was American was probably not going to cost him his life. As soon as the murderers found out that Pearl was Jewish American, his fate was sealed. I had never heard anyone accuse Danny Pearl of anti-Muslim bias. He was an honest journalist, seeking the truth, at considerable personal risk. He did not go to Pakistan representing the Israeli or the American governments; it would be wrong to assume that he personally approved of the policies of these two governments. He represented himself and his newspaper. Yet, none of these facts mattered to his murderers. The word "Jew" kept on flashing in their heads any time they beheld the chained Pearl. And his Jewishness was the only thing that was important to them. Hadn't Hitler done the same thing and caused the world so much grief? I wonder what Danny Pearl's final thoughts were. In his wildest nightmare could Pearl have imagined that in this day and age his birth into a Jewish family was going to be the sole reason for his premature death at the hands of the terrorists? What a sad commentary on the times we live in!

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

## President on the dock

Your front-page story "Unprecedented Wish" (March 3), suffers from several contradictions pertaining to the office of the President of the Republic. People can and people do appeal to the Head of State or Head of Government for redress or with demands. These high offices are not constrained in referring matters to the concerned ministries or departments.

The President in a democracy can only be in office with the mandate of the people through an electoral process. A functionary of MOPT or BTB does not go through any similar process and cannot be a greater keeper of the interest of the people than the President.

Finally any communication from the President deserves all confidentiality within the government.

In your story a functionary of BTB is placing the Hon'ble President on the dock and is stoutly

standing up for the people. It is irreverent and derisive and offends our sentiments. Should MOPT be unable to comply, it could respectfully communicate the same. It is regrettable that you paper should carry it with such prominence with an unfortunate if not Dickensian hyperbole in its caption. The high office of the Hon'ble President must be given due esteem and may deserve an apology.

AKM Shamsuddoha  
Kishoreganj

## "Celebrating Valentine's Day"

This is a reply to the letter "Celebrating Valentine's Day" by Mr. Meer Ameenul-Barie (February 15). I'd like to point out to him that in the Quran, it is nowhere written that the Muslims cannot take part in the festivals of other religions. I myself am not a very religious person, but I

am giving this example because Mr. Ameenul-Barie appears to be very religious minded. Everyone is entitled to an opinion.

However, I am surprised by the



Valentine's Day: Un-Islamic?

rigidity, which Mr. Ameenul Barie has demonstrated. He is living in New York and yet is writing such letters. Mr. Barie, it seems to me you have never been in love. Love is one

of the greatest gifts to human beings. It is not bounded by religion, or the borders we use to separate ourselves. Your letter has proved that you are nothing but a religious zealot who does not know a thing about his own religion, let alone love.

Rahat  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

## Arabic as a compulsory language

I refer to the letters suggesting that teaching of the Arabic language be made compulsory in the schools of Bangladesh. The reasoning behind this suggestion, according to the writers, are that once we have all learnt Arabic, we would then be closer to Islam and this would protect us from worldly sins and vices.

It should follow from the above reasoning that all the Muslim citizens of Arab countries are good

Muslims who have attained closeness to Islam since they read the Holy Quran in Arabic and have understood its real meaning unlike those of us who have so far been reading translations of the Quran in English and other non Arabic languages.

This is hardly the case and Arabs are not better or no worse as Muslims than are non-Arabs. Just because someone is able to read and understand Arabic does not make him a better human being or a better Muslim. Rather than learning Arabic to be a better person, we should endeavour as a society to respect one another's opinions and beliefs, and to behave in an open and honest manner with those people around us with whom we interact.

I do, however, agree with the writer of the above letters that reading the Quran in Arabic in parrot fashion without understanding its meaning is a waste of time. In order

to solve this problem, our schools should introduce high quality Bangla or English translations of the Quran for those of our children who study religion at school.

Of course it is always a great advantage for our students to learn any number of second and third languages, be it Arabic or English or Japanese. We have much to learn from the Arabs, the English and the Japanese, just as they have much to learn from us.

Ahsan Ahmed  
Indira Road, Dhaka

Over the last few weeks a lot has been written in your letters column about the Arabic language - whether Arabic should be made compulsory in schools and whether Holy Quran can be read through any other language apart from Arabic.

Throughout the history of mankind, God sent Prophets to save humanity from misery and debauchery, to

the places where the need was most. According to the history of our religion, all the documented Prophets were sent to Middle East. Arabic was the language of the Arabs and obviously the communication from God came in Arabic. There is nothing about Arabic language being holy.

Bashir Ahmad  
Wolverhampton WV1 9QQ, U.K.

## DMCH neuro-surgery ward

Your paper regularly prints articles about the exploitation, corruption and extortion being carried out at DMCH.

Often you quote hapless doctors unable to cope with the militant 3<sup>rd</sup> class employees who seem to have the run of the place, the lack of resources and the pilferage of supplies.

But I can't recall a single article

where you quoted the Director General (?) of DMCH. Why is that?

Dorji  
Dhaka

## Friday picnic!

On a Friday the Muslims are to offer their Jumma prayer and at the end, while leaving the congregation are to praise Allah and speak of Him only. Later each person or 'the believers' are to carry on with their usual work. This is what Surah 'Jumayat' tells us in the Holy Quran. Whether or not a country is a 'Muslim Country'; Surah Jumayat applies to all the believers in Allah.

But I feel quite disturbed at what happens on Friday every year during winter time. Will some one please explain why we have 'picnic'(s) on Friday ever since the day has been declared as a public holiday?