

## Attack on Labour Court a terrible signal

*Government must do better than just blame the Opposition*

GOVERNMENT party backed activists attacked the Labour Court in Chittagong and the Judge had to flee to the toilet to save his life. The staff of the Court was injured in the attack and the Court office was demolished as a result of that onslaught. A number of the attackers were arrested under the PSA but move to get them released is already afoot. Meanwhile, in a post-Commonwealth Summit press briefing, the Prime minister has said that the Opposition is sponsoring crimes hence the law and order situation. It's possible the government will have to act quickly to prove that the situation is under control than simply deny.

The attack on the Labour Court has been labeled as unprecedented by many quarters but many fear that this may become the first of the same in a series. Once courts have been attacked and with apparent confidence by government party supporters, one can never say when the next court will come up in the target list. The Court was in fact hearing a case on the order of the Supreme Court relating to complaints involving dockyard labourers who mounted the attack. Clearly, nothing is safe now.

The immediate effect will be on Labour Courts who shall now be sufficiently intimidated by such an attack and will think long and be prepared to run longer while hearing a case. They shall have to post lookouts to see if angry crowds arrive at the gates to "influence" decisions. At least some will hesitate to deliver unpopular judgments especially concerning the government backed labour unions. In fact any militant union will now have the upper hand in any dispute after this.

But the most deadly signal has been to the said unions. Once a court has been attacked no other institution is left to be worried about. One is even worried that this may be interpreted as the go ahead to attack other courts, never mind if that is not the case.

Since that is not the case, it appears that supporters are going beyond all semblance of control. The donor consortium will most probably also note this route towards anarchy. The law and order problem, one hopes doesn't become a stumbling block to the granting of money Bangladesh is seeking soon.

And one certainly hopes as well that worse days are not ahead. The government will have to do better than just blame the Opposition and hope for the best.

## Govt ignoring rights of the accused

*Lack of transparency in Bahauddin case too obvious to ignore*

SINCE his arrest at the airport on his way to the US in the early hours of February 28, Bahauddin Nasim, Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina's special assistant, has remained ex-communicado. Attempts of his near and dear ones and those of his partymen to meet him either in police custody or in jail have met with refusals. Only day before yesterday, an eleven-member AL delegation which went to see him at the central jail were not allowed in, all of this only serving to highlight the anxiety about his welfare.

When requests to see him are declined in contravention of the jail code what are we to suppose? Would it not give rise to trepidation that maybe Bahauddin is 'not in a condition' to be presented before his relatives and acquaintances?

In the face of such questions it becomes incumbent upon the home ministry to allow the visits to let his people see for themselves as to what his welfare status is like. Only that way can the 'misgivings' be put to rest.

We think the denial of such visits to Bahauddin Nasim is more of an extension of the pattern of impingement on his fundamental rights that has characterised the handling of his case from the beginning. He was taken on police remand for five days on the understanding that he would be brought before the court after the expiry of that period but this has not been done. As it is, his arrest on charges of carrying an allegedly excessive amount of foreign exchange and 'in connection with' the case of attacking Khaleda Zia's motorcade in Madaripur last year put the onus squarely on the government to prove such allegations. Why was it necessary to pick him up at the airport when the case of motorcade attack has been with the government since it came to power more than five months ago? And now comes the serious anxiety about the shape he is in to answer for.

We notice a total lack of transparency in dealing with the Bahauddin case that makes the very motive of his arrest suspect in the eye of law. We can find no word strong enough to protest this arrogant display of power and what's more a flagrant violation of the fundamental rights of a citizen.

ESAM SOHALI

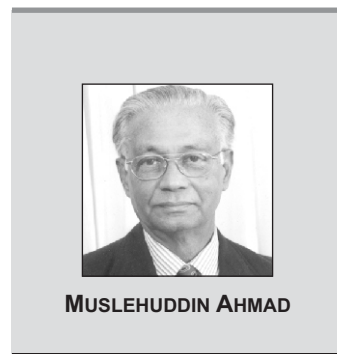
If a man claims to be what he is not and is caught, he is termed a fraud. On the other hand, however, if he claims to be what he actually is, and others disbelieve him, he is either a victim of misfortune or circumstances or both. It is this case of misfortune and mismatched circumstances which is bedeviling George W. Bush in terms of popular perceptions in the Islamic world. The recent Gallup poll of certain selected Muslim countries make it plain that the American President's overpaid public relations people are doing a pathetic job about projecting the true George Bush to the world.

The 43rd President of the United States came to the White House as

probably the most pro-Arab, pro-Muslim American leader since Dwight Eisenhower. During his hard-fought election campaign, he received the unanimous endorsement of all major Muslim groups in the US, captured eighty percent of the American Muslim vote, and sharply condemned racial profiling laws that were passed under the Clinton-Gore administration.

The attitude of George Bush towards Arabs, Muslims, and subsequently to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, is both ingrained and inherited. The president's patrician grandfather, Senator Prescott Bush, was known for his distrust of Israel while his father, 41st president, a life long personal friend of many Arab leaders, was despised by the Israelis for being too accommodating to the Palestinian side.

## ".....This is war" Sharon



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

FROM an Olive tree a branch with leaves is traditionally extended to offer peace to the enemies. This time this was certainly different and only deadly bullets were fired from beneath an Olive tree by a lone Palestinian gunman that killed 10 Israelis, 7 of which were well-armed soldiers and 3 settlers [Reuters 3/3/02]. When everything was silent the gunman fled leaving his decades old rifle, the parts of which were nailed repeatedly to keep them in place. This single episode clearly proves how useless the modern arms and armaments are even with highly trained soldiers; it's only man behind the gun that matters. The Palestinian gunman was madly determined to kill and get killed, if necessary, but on the other side it was the group of soldiers with so much of modern weapons but not with that much of determination.

Only twelve hours earlier, a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up in the midst of Israeli civilians in the Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem when the Israelis were emerging from the Synagogue after Sabbath prayer killing nine people including 5 children. Thus within around twelve hours 19 Israelis were killed. So, this time and probably only this time Sharon was right ".....this is war" said Prime Minister Sharon.

This is a war for survival for the Israelis. As the situation stands, the very existence of Israel seems at stake as mad fight is on. As the Palestinians are born in the tent, brought up in the tent and die in the tent; they have nothing more to lose. If the Israelis lose, they lose everything. Many religious Jews believe that according to the original Torah, the Jews can not have a state; this is what was ordained by the Almighty

to the "wondering" people the Jews - for their sins. Even after the suicide bomber's killing of 9 Jews in front of the Synagogue some religious Jews said, "The Almighty wants to test us to see if we will continue to believe." Another said, "We have to study and follow the Torah, keep the Sabbath and love one another. If we behave better, the trouble will end." Undoubtedly, But unfortunately for the unacceptable behavior of their leaders which taints their image, the Jews have been the targets even

Gaza where another 10 Palestinians and 2 Israelis were killed. Arafat was having a meeting with an envoy of European Union when bombs fell within a couple of yards of the meeting place in Palestinian head quarters in Ramallah. So the war is on; one side with very modern military equipment and the other with age old rifles and suicide bombing gadgets.

Ariel Sharon remains absolutely adamant about waging a war against the Palestinians. Over and

peace plan of Crown Prince Abdullah. Secretary Colin Powell expressed grave concern over the carnage that is going on in the area and called on both parties to do everything possible to bring an end to this unfortunate spiral of violence. There was no direct commitment from President Bush to intervene. He, however, reiterated his earlier stand that there would be two states Israel and Palestinian state - in the area within recognized borders. He continued to insist that Chairman

However, next day the statement of Ariel Sharon that 'only if Israel continued to increase the other side's losses would the Palestinians sit to talk' created discernable concern in the US Administration. Sharon insisted in his statement that the Palestinians are to be "hit hard" and "beaten" to force them back to the bargaining table. Sharon's comments that 'Israel would intentionally cause casualties among the Palestinians to force them to the bargaining table' caught the atten-

of elderly men and women and also children do not fall under the category of fighting terrorism. Yes, suicide bombings and deliberate shootings of civilians can be bracketed with terrorism though they do these ghastly things as a part of their fight against occupation, but these can not be condoned by any one. In any case, the suicide bombers and random killers die or killed on the spot while deliberate bombings and killings by the state army of the civilians under the pretext of flashing out terrorists clearly attracts the provisions of mass murder and genocide and the persons giving such orders are required to be taken care of by the International Tribunal in The Hague. One notice or invitation by the International Tribunal as rightly put by Shimon Peres would stop the ball rolling and would very likely stop such killings that the Israeli forces have been doing merrily for sometime under the order of Prime Minister.

Serious concern was expressed by the EU over the deteriorating situation in the M-East. It was any way good that EU's envoy was not hit by the Israeli bomb while he was having discussions with Arafat. It was also good that the President Bush also at long last decided to send back Anthony Zinni to the battle ground. But it appears too little and too late. The situation is apparently much beyond Zinni unless he carries the direct word of President Bush for halting Israeli military operation. If the Israeli military operations stop, Arafat is allowed to move out of Ramallah freely (he must be free to attend Beirut Arab summit on March 27 & 28) and army is withdrawn to a safe distance, Palestinians are likely to respond positively. This may bring some semblance of calm in the area though the anger and the wounds are too deep for any rational behaviour.

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## SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Sharon may say whatever he likes but deliberate killings by organized army of the civilians including women and children under the direct orders of the Prime Minister cannot be termed as fighting terrorism... Bulldozing of family houses and killing of elderly men and women and also children do not fall under the category of fighting terrorism.

today in many countries. Even the dead is not spared; often the cemeteries are desecrated. Only the USA seems to be the exception at least for the time being. But the gentle ripples are discernable. So is the worry of religious Jews who believe in the original Torah (Tourat) the Heavenly Book.

Baffled Ariel Sharon called his security cabinet and decided to continue further military strikes against the Palestinians. He used in F-16, Apache helicopters and tanks and raided two Palestinian refugee camps in Balata and other suspected areas of Nablus, Ramallah, Rafah and killed about 20 Palestinians some Palestinian security men and rest civilians. The fear and desperation of the Israeli soldiers led to killing of a Palestinian mother with 3 children in a pick up and several sick in an ambulance which the Israeli soldier said was being driven very fast. The ambulances are required to be driven fast as they carry the sick. This was apparently deliberate but Israel apologized saying these were mistakes. The Palestinian Authority also condemned the suicide bombings and killings of Israeli civilians. It was reported that about 75 people on both sides were killed in 72 hours. The cycle of revenge and counter-revenge continued. Against two home made rockets fired into Israeli northern town where a child was lightly injured, Israeli forces stuck very hard by land air and navy at

above that, he is constantly instigated by his right wing cabinet ministers for further military actions against the Palestinians. Minister Lieberman who heads a small party of Russian immigrants proposed that if the Palestinians did not stop the terrorist activities then, "At 8 in the morning we will bomb all the commercial centers in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Of course, we will tell them in advance so everyone can run home. At 12 we'll bomb their gas stations... At 2, we'll bomb all the banks." However, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was quick to add that "At 6, you'll receive an invitation to the International Tribunal in The Hague." meaning thereby that the charges of genocide will be brought against him. Well said, Shimon, but you could do still better if you and you Labour members had quit Sharon's government forthwith. However, shocking thing is that this was the attitude of a person who immigrated from Russia and never wanted to bomb and finish everything of the Holy Land. With these types of people remaining in charge, one can never expect any peace in the region.

Here brings the duties and obligations of the leaders around the world. President Mubarak of Egypt visited the White House during the last week and had meeting with President Bush. He was undoubtedly having discussion on the present M-East violence and the

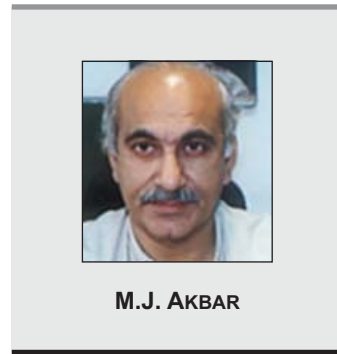
Arafat must do everything possible to stop the violence, but stopped short of saying that Sharon also must do his part as the carnage is badly affecting the ordinary civilians on both sides. Earlier, White House Press spokesman Ari Fleisher blamed President Clinton for going too far that led to the violence. He apparently ignored the fact that the violence really started some 17 months ago with the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Holy sites to prove that Israel holds sovereignty over the Holy Places. This created a lot of embarrassment as reportedly President Bush himself did not like this. Ari Fleisher, however, did well by retracting his statement saying he should not have gone that far.

President Mubarak proposed a summit meeting between Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and President Arafat saying that even if they did not like, the meeting must take place to create an environment that could lead to reduction of violence. The US reaction did not seem positive as the situation on the ground was not congenial for such a summit. President Bush, however, praised the initiative of Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and indicated that some action was already taken by sending CIA director George Tenet and William Burns to Saudi Arabia for exploring the possibilities. Thus the visit of President Mubarak to the US could not bring any substantial change in the attitude of the US administration.

Secretary Powell while appearing before the House Committee looked really concerned about the happenings in the M-East. He referred to Sharon's statements and said, "If you [Sharon] declare war against the Palestinians thinking that you can solve the problem by seeing how many Palestinians can be killed, I don't know that that leads us anywhere."

As usual, Sharon responded saying "Israel is only fighting back against the terrorists organization in the context of its right to self defense." "He, like Mr. Bush, was simply fighting terrorism." Sharon may say whatever he likes but deliberate killings by organized army of the civilians including women and children under the direct orders of the Prime Minister cannot be termed as fighting terrorism. The mother and the children in the ambulance are not terrorists. Bulldozing of family houses and killing

## A mystery of modern India



M.J. AKBAR

A child born in the year that Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister of India would have the right to vote today. A child born in 1985 would vote in the next general election. He would be 17 today.

In 1985 the Supreme Court of India decided in favour of an elderly and unknown Muslim divorcee from Indore, the daughter of a head constable, Shah Bano, who had been asking, for seven years in lower courts, for just five hundred rupees from her husband as maintenance. She thought this amount reasonable compensation from a man who had been her husband for 43 years, before divorcing her in order to marry again. The Supreme Court agreed. The husband felt otherwise; he argued that according to his interpretation of Muslim law he had paid his wife the *mahr* and *idda* (maintenance for three months) that was due. The Supreme Court ruled that under the Constitution a former husband had to provide reasonable support to a divorcee if she had no means of supporting herself.

The news first appeared on the edges of the media. Then, gradually, it began to acquire ballast. A section of the country's self-appointed Muslim leaders thought they had found a route map back to relevance. This judgment, instead of being addressed with a sense of responsibility, was turned into a

weapon to challenge the Constitution of India. There is sufficient space in Islamic jurisprudence for interpretation according to changing norms in social law: every Muslim country has made place for reinterpretation in its legal code. Certain Muslim leaders, notably Syed Shahabuddin and the ever-present Shahi Imam (father of the incumbent), decided that the proper response to the Supreme Court was hysteria designed to provoke a

Babri mosque. If L.K. Advani, whose party, the BJP, had been reduced to two seats in the 1984-85 Lok Sabha (even Atal Behari Vajpayee had been defeated, in Gwalior) had beamed at that point, he would have been fully justified. He now decided to teach the government of India, which had bowed to Muslim fundamentalists, just how powerful Hindu hysteria could be. Long after Shah Bano has been forgotten the drums of Ayodhya still resonate through

or in the dull thud of the daily toll from Kashmir. Those children of sixteen and seventeen, propelled by masterminds filled with hate, are spreading terror in Gujarat today. They have fed on this diet for so long that they know no other. This is a generation that has lived through two decades of darkness punctuated by the flash of sword, fire and gunshot. It is a time in our history when the living feed off death.

To an extent this dance of necro-

ministers have repeatedly had other things to do when the wind they had sown turned into fire-laden whirlwinds. The most notable example still remains the imperturbable P.V. Narasimha Rao who could not be perturbed when the Babri mosque was being destroyed. He remained a picture of stoicism during the riots of 1992 and 1993, which must rank as the worst in a terrible history. The Congress played this game through duplicity; the BJP plays it straight.

## BYLINE

Is this what the Mahatma wanted to be remembered for, his prohibition policy? Gujarat has flaunted every other message of the Mahatma, has shredded the spirit of that great soul at every level, among the people as well as the administration. Why should the government show such deference to one comparatively minor element of the Gandhian philosophy when it has no respect for anything that the man did or represented?

virtual revolt of Muslims against the Indian state. It was as unprecedented as it was artificial. Shahabuddin consciously used the language and idiom of separatism, while the clerics dusted off that old and paradoxical cry that Islam was in danger. (This is paradoxical because, for the believer, faith cannot be in danger from men.) Large rallies were held where the rhetoric was acid, the provocation severe and the intention vicious. But what left the country aghast was the slow retreat and sudden capitulation by the Congress government of the still inexperienced Rajiv Gandhi under this hysterical assault. In May 1986 the Congress forced through what was called, without irony, the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill. Trying to balance appeasement of fanatic Muslims with appeasement of fanatic Hindus, Rajiv Gandhi, apparently advised by his friend and relative Arun Nehru, reopened the locked gates of the spot known as

the life and blood of our country.

That child of 1985 has been weaned on the idiom of the Hindu-Muslim conflict, and nothing else, ever since he was born. A child born in 1947 would certainly have heard of the terrible riots of Partition in family stories, and perhaps seen the pain in his parents' eyes, but there was also the heady ideology of socialism in the air as he grew up anywhere in the country. Idealism had options in the 1960s, from the *khaddar* band of Ram Manohar Lohia to the crimson violence of the Naxalites. There were political and economic causes to stir the young in the 1970s, for democracy and an equitable society. But from the 1980s Indians have heard nothing but the sound of communal violence, whether in the brief but powerful secessionist movement in Punjab; in the horror of the anti-Sikh riots and the continuing waste and desolation of the Hindu-Muslim conflict, a confrontation over many battlefields; in sectarian caste wars,

mancers is a puppet, but the masters pulling the strings are not only invisible but also intelligent. The trick is not to pull the strings, or perhaps have no strings at all. All that the puppeteers have to do is clear the stage and allow free space for havoc to reign over a specified period of time. Two days is generally considered sufficient for hate to exhaust itself. Gujarat's chief minister Narendra Modi extended his patronage to the "sentiment" of those who sought vengeance against Muslims everywhere for what some Muslims had done in Godhra. And since those fanatic killers at Godhra had used fire, so the revenge had to take the same form even as the message was sent to every Muslim community in the whole state: we shall leave the charred ash of your bodies everywhere to teach you the meaning of your insolence. To be fair to Narendra Modi, he is not the first politician to use a blind eye. Congress prime ministers and chief

The Congress had to pretend to be secular and show concern for Muslims since it wanted their vote. The BJP knows that it cannot get the Muslim vote and so uses any opportunity to consolidate such elements of the Hindu vote as can be turned in its direction. One week ago the BJP chief minister was struggling to win a by-election in Gujarat. Today, thanks to the appalling crimes of Muslims at Godhra and rampant, killing Hindu mobs in Ahmedabad, Varoda, Rajkot, Mehsana, Surat and a dozen other places, the BJP would be happy to consider any form of election in the state. You reward "sentiment" and "sentiment" rewards you. Little wonder that the BJP has sent official congratulations to chief minister Narendra Modi for doing an excellent job in the political management of "sentiment". Since the ultimate vindication in a democracy is the approval of the ballot box, no one argues with a potential winner. The means are irrelevant to end.

Here is a suggestion for chief minister Narendra Modi and all his successors: please end prohibition in Gujarat. Gujarat is the only state in the country that still persists with the formality of what was once a national obligation. It does so, they all explain, out of respect for a great son of the soil, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Is this what the Mahatma wanted to be remembered for, his prohibition policy? Gujarat has flaunted every other message of the Mahatma, has shredded the spirit of that great soul at every level, among the people as well as the administration. Why should the government show such deference to one comparatively minor element of the Gandhian philosophy when it has no respect for anything that the man did or represented? Why should the people want any law because of Gandhi? They have forgotten him as well. Did the mobs who turned the last few days into a nightmare think that they were the heirs of Babu?

Maybe a small test would illustrate the point. Do a test among those who were born in the year that Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister or even go back to the year that Shah Bano filed her petition against her husband in a local court of Indore under the Prevention of Destitution and Vagrancy Act, 1978. Ask them who was Babu. If one out of a hundred knew the correct answer I would be surprised. Make it easier. Ask them who was Gandhi. The brighter ones might answer Indira Gandhi; and Rajiv Gandhi would be familiar. But ask them who was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, born in 1869 (the year the Suez Canal was opened) in the city of Porbandar in Kathiawar.

The answer will tell you why so many questions hang over India.

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## OPINION

## George Bush: America's finest ambassador

The senior Bush's Secretary of State (and Junior's top advisor), James Baker, was declared persona non grata by the Yitzhak Shamir government for similar reasons. As governor of Texas, the junior Bush made sure that Muslim religious leaders were always invited to his faith-based programs and conferences. It was during his governorship, that the first Muslim prayer was said at the opening of the Texas legislature. And right at inauguration, George W. Bush changed presidential language forever when he added the term 'mosque' to the oft-used phrase 'America's churches and synagogues'.

Far deeper than the surface of politics is a personal life that would have been considered a model of propriety and decency in any soci-

ety, specially an Islamic one. Soft-spoken and plain talking, George W. Bush gave up alcohol suddenly and completely twenty years ago and is known to disapprove of drinking at the White House. A supportive father, he had no compunction letting the courts punish his own daughters for drinking and partying a few months ago. In a society where extra-marital affairs are often the norm, especially amongst the high and the mighty, the Bushes have maintained a scandal-free conjugal life that is a unique model of wholesomeness.

Nonetheless, there was September 11, 2001. In spite of the tremendous pressure to seek retribution from Muslims and Arabs as a whole, the President went on television and radio repeatedly to defend the values of Islam. "Islam is

a religion of tolerance and peace...those who murder in the name of Allah blaspheme the very name of Allah", so said the President to the U.S. Congress nine days after that terrible tragedy. Soon afterwards, shocking powerful domestic interests and Israel, George W. Bush became the first American president to explicitly call for the creation of a separate Palestinian state. And, to this day he keeps on ignoring the overwhelming mandate of the United States Congress to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the US embassy to that city. It is no wonder that a Jewish friend of mine recently pined, only in half-jest, that America has elected its first Arab president!

Why, then, so much negative opinion about George Bush from Jericho to Jakarta?

Partly, because of the baggage of legacy. America has been often perceived as anti-Arab (hence anti-Muslim) thanks to the Israeli-Palestinian matter. One president can hardly change that view overnight. Rather, the said president takes on the personification of that anti-American suspicion. What has certainly not helped this American president is the often irresponsible statements made post-September 11, and aired instantly by CNN and FOX, by some misguided members of the American elite, including some in his own party.

But American provocateurs are not the only ones fishing in troubled waters. Salivating at the political dividends, certain leftist and Islamist quarters have tried hard to use the misery in New York and Kabul to fan anti-Americanism in

the Islamic world. Parties that could barely manage five percent of the votes are hoping to march to power on the backs of noisy street demonstrations that crudely exploit the economic helplessness and religious superstitions of ignorant masses. The boogey of a gun-toting, Islam-hating, Jew-loving Crusader George W. Bush is an absolute necessity if these radicals have to have any chance at success on the streets or at the polls.

Hence, the abject necessity of correcting the picture. Unfortunately, President Bush's public relations team seems to be missing in action save the mundane briefings at the State Department and equally lacklustre press appearances by US envoys in most of the Islamic world. Most intelligent people put little stock in what some

government's official policy line is or what statistics some deputy assistant secretary is sprouting. What is needed is to present the United States in human, everyday terms. No person can do it with more élan, more sincerity, and more conviction than the most obvious symbol of America: her President. He has been painted in the darkest colours by his detractors; it is time to show him in his true bearing. Only then can his image and America's be restored to their accurate hues.

The best ambassador that George W. Bush can have in the Islamic world is, well, George W. Bush.