

## Children's death in Madrassah fire is murder

*Immediate supervision of these institutions needed*

THE death by burning of six children and one adult in a fire that consumed a girls' madrassah should come as a wake-up call to all about the shadowy world of Islamic education as it exists in Bangladesh. The children were confined inside this religious seminary without any supervision or legal coverage. Nobody bothered to check whether acts were being committed which went against the interest of the child or even safety. Now a price has been paid for that. The deaths are a terrible instance of abdication of moral and social responsibility by all.

Islamic education attracts many and there is an obvious belief in its sacrosanct status by those who send their children to such institutions. Many are from the poorer sections of society who think that the best education is actually provided by such institutions. But sometimes the worst neglect is by those who run these outfits to make money and never take any responsibility for the manner in which they are run. If the media reports are true, they were virtually kept as prisoners and this actually shielded any kind of scrutiny.

Religious education and establishments are sensitive topics and most have shied away from any kind of supervision and inspection. The governments have felt that it's not their business and the religious lobby in Bangladesh with their political clout have always kept this turf exclusively to themselves. Political governments whether they owe their electoral victories to such institution supporting voters or who wish not to disturb such elements are both responsible for letting the situation reach a point where religious education delivery has become an independent world outside the purview of the republic. So now after this fire they stand condemned as patrons of deaths of children.

It's important for the authorities to take charge of the entire education system that exists in the country. Just as there is a stream of education of the privileged section of society which is never discussed or scrutinized, there appears to be one of the less privileged and this takes in many more children. By failing to supervise, the government stands accused of wilful neglect. Either they don't want to anger their friends coming from the religious establishment or, and this is more likely, they don't care about who goes to these institutions meant for the invisible social classes.

This argument doesn't absolve them of any responsibility and we demand that a full enquiry of the incident and of this particular stream of education in general be immediately done to punish the culprits and repair the flaws of religion based education in Bangladesh.

## Ayodhya reprieve

*Respite for Vajpayee to rein in VHP*

THE militant Hindu revivalist organisation Vishwa Hindu Parishad's threatening posture to construct Rama temple on the disputed ruins of Babri Mosque last Friday got diffused but the sectarian temperature has not quite gone down.

The VHP impelled by the Indian Supreme Court's latest ruling that emphatically forbade any construction work within 64 acres of the disputed land scaled down its agenda to perform *Shiladan* prayers less than a mile outside the stated perimeter. But their handing over of two pillars of a future Rama shrine to a representative of the prime minister of India was regarded as placatory to the VHP by the detractors of the BJP-led government at the centre.

In retrospect, it cannot be slurred over that it's on the back of the BJP's spearheading of the temple building campaign in early 1990s that the party emerged as a political force in India. Now the thing to watch will be how this BJP hang-up is balanced out with the party's reliance on the NDA allies to keep in power. For, the BJP's coalition partners themselves cannot afford to make a short shrift of the considerable Muslim support they enjoy.

That said, let's turn to the immediate concern for communal harmony being felt in neighbouring India. While relief was expressed after the dilution of an impending crisis centred on the VHP's threatened storming of the Babri Mosque ruins, something or the other has since happened at the inter-communal level. In Ahmedabad and Baroda there have been sectarian clashes with the police having had to fire upon feuding mobs. As a result, four lives have been lost and several injured. Earlier, the Gujarat riots following the Godhra train massacre had taken a toll of 700 lives, mostly among the minority community.

We have noted also that the Hindu hardliners vandalised the state legislature in Orissa in protest against remarks made by some lawmakers who expressly opposed the Ayodhya temple building drive. Having dealt with the law and order situation in Ayodhya with an iron hand, one hopes that the Indian government will not fail to stop the loss of lives with an equal effectiveness. Essentially, the onus is on the BJP-led government to rein in the VHP and Bajrangdal, the extremist Frankenstein in the Bharatiya Janata Party. We believe the political leadership in India as a whole is seized of the imperative necessity for maintaining a secular balance in the neighbouring country for the good of South Asia.

# The Saudi peace initiative for Middle East



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IN the Middle East, now in flux where the opinions held, the assessments made and the conclusions drawn are rendered irrelevant in a matter of hours, the only thing that is holding good since its inception last month is the 'vision' of a peace plan outlined by Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. Amidst ever-escalating violence in the West Bank and Gaza the move is considered an appropriate departure from the Palestinians' inconsequential stance of an indefinite *intifada* duly matched by Israel's brutal response. In the present situation with Israelis and Palestinians killing each other and no one intervening, Abdullah's plan is something positive. It is therefore gathering steam in spite of mixed reaction.

In a February 17 column by the *New York Times*'s (NYT) Thomas Friedman, Crown Prince Abdullah let himself be quoted saying that he had drafted a proposal for full Arab normalisation with Israel in exchange for full Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories in accordance with UN resolution. The Prince was himself to spell out his plan in a speech at the next month's Arab summit in Beirut but shelved it because of Ariel Sharon's hardline policies. However the Prince hinted that he was still open to reviving the plan if the Israelis worked towards improving the ground situation.

Even though the specifics of the plan are yet to be known, the initiative has been billed as the most important peace plan in the recent history of Middle East conflict and seems to be backed by all parties concerned.

The importance of the land-for-peace initiative, to borrow the word of European Union's foreign policy czar Javier Solana, comes from two elements: one is the message of full normalization and other is messenger itself -- Saudi Arabia which is one of the strongest voices in the Arab world, wielding great influ-

ence among the Muslims the world over. Its importance also stems from the initiative's implicit message for the Israelis: peace with Arab world is possible should they make peace with the Palestinians. Few doubt the credence of the straight-talking Prince who is known for his aplomb and has for the first time explicitly defined peace as full normalisation between Israel and Arab states. Yasser Arafat surrounded by Israeli tanks in Ramallah jumped at the idea. The Palestinians, like him, feel that it is the best idea since 1991 Madrid conference. According to chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat, it constitutes a very solid base for peace formula. Even for Arafat, he could not make peace alone; neither could he bring himself to sign the dotted line especially where Jerusalem was concerned. He needed to know that the rest of

the Arab world was behind him. At long last Abdullah's plan seems, in a great measure, to fulfil that condition. Arab watchers however see the plan as an acid test of Israel's willingness to make peace in the region although some Israelis find the plan most important since December 2000 when former US President Bill Clinton almost brokered a settlement at Camp David. The Jewish state seems to be warming up to the idea with Israeli President Moshe Katsov making an offer to visit Riyadh or receive Abdullah in Tel Aviv (the Saudi press was quick to

interview with the *Times* that the plan needed to be fleshed out more before "we declare, we have solution". However, sending Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns, a frequent negotiator with both Israelis and Palestinians, was an indication that the administration was pursuing the Abdullah initiative.

Notwithstanding the good tidings for the Saudi peace plan there are detractors who tend to put it in different light. So far, Saudi Arabia took an uncompromising attitude towards Arab recognition of Israel; its leadership in the Arab world. Irrespective of the Crown Prince's motive his plan has sparked new hopes in the Middle East's desperate situation and is understandably getting wide diplomatic attention. However, even a casual scrutiny of the Saudi peace plan will reveal that fundamentally there is nothing new in it except its approach. Both the UN resolutions nos 242 and 338 of 1967 and 1973 respectively called for Israel's pullback to pre-1967 border and as a matter of fact even the Oslo accord was based on this with, of course, some modifica-

tions. The world is painfully aware of the fate of these resolutions and accord. Of the territories Israel occupied in 1967 war it withdrew only from the Sinai as a part of Camp David accord. It's withdrawal from Gaza and West Bank where 400000 Jews live in 140 settlements is a mockery of Oslo accord. The Golan Heights still remain under full Israeli occupation and its Arab population is replaced by Jewish settlers.

The details of the Saudi proposal are not known. Yet, taking into consideration the two principal aspects of the plan, the Israeli withdrawal and Arab recognition, the hurdles to the proposal's implementation, seem enormous. As sheer propaganda to put an end to a chronic Arab apathy to Palestinians' cause? Some even view it as an attempt of Saudi Kingdom to reassert its leadership in the Arab world. Irrespective of the Crown Prince's motive his plan has sparked new hopes in the Middle East's desperate situation and is understandably getting wide diplomatic attention. However, even a casual scrutiny of the Saudi peace plan will reveal that fundamentally there is nothing new in it except its approach. Both the UN resolutions nos 242 and 338 of 1967 and 1973 respectively called for Israel's pullback to pre-1967 border and as a matter of fact even the Oslo accord was based on this with, of course, some modifica-

when it came to the question of Israel's security and the sensibility of both with regards to Jerusalem. Then there are questions of Jewish settlement which continues to expand and rights of return for Palestinian diaspora to which Israel already conveyed their emphatic no. Even basically will the lunatic fringe in Israel agree to withdraw from a land whose usurpation is considered by them their divine right? Then, what's about the recognition of Israel by the Arab states en masse? The Arabs are notoriously divided as testified by the contemporary history of the Arab world. They seldom united on any issue confronting the Arab world except for their common hatred towards Israel. Incidentally, Syria has not reacted to Abdullah plan at all. The biggest test of all will be of the Arab willingness to arrive at a consensus during its March 27-28 meet in Beirut. The unity and fusion of ranks has never been a staple for Arab politics. At least for the present there is hardly any sign of it.

Given the fate of several peace plans in the past and the shreds to which Israel was able to reduce them, particularly the Oslo accord, all one can do is to keep one's finger crossed. Nevertheless, the plan is bold one and comes from one of the most credible leaders of the Arab world. If implemented in its entirety, an apparently besieged Israel stands to gain the most. So far as the Palestinians are concerned, Abdullah plan amounts to what has been aptly called 'a lifebuoy' thrown to them for swimming back to shore.

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

## PERSPECTIVES

**Given the fate of several peace plans in the past and the shreds to which Israel was able to reduce them, particularly the Oslo accord, all one can do is to keep one's finger crossed. Nevertheless, the plan is bold one and comes from one of the most credible leaders of the Arab world. If implemented in its entirety, an apparently besieged Israel stands to gain the most. So far as the Palestinians are concerned, Abdullah plan amounts to what has been aptly called 'a lifebuoy' thrown to them for swimming back to shore.**

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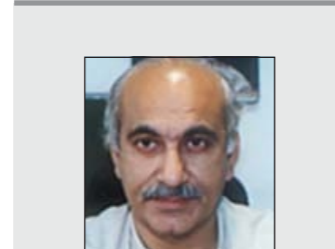
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# The virtue of elastic handcuffs



M.J. AKBAR

IF you have to choose between information and common sense in Delhi, opt for common sense. Don't of course mention this to journalists, or they might have nothing to write about. Don't tell politicians and bureaucrats either, or they will have nothing to talk about. Since the favourite parlour game of India is speculation, every-one one wants to know what is going to happen next. The route map to foreknowledge is not inside information but plain-text common sense.

Information is brittle and variable. This is not a character flaw of Delhi's heavy hitters. It is not that people tell lies; it is simply that truth changes. During moments of drama or concern truth can change very fast; while you are pontificating on one version another has already replaced it in some corridor of power. Politics is a game of options chasing one another; if power is moored too strongly to principle, it snaps, bringing some edifice down. The navigators of the system keep skimming a twisting current in order to move forward. That is their sole means of travel.

All the information spewing out of Delhi over the past week suggested some kind of a crisis, even one that could conceivably bring down the government of Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee. The leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, nestled in the pillboxes of television, seemed

to have launched a war against the BJP-led government as they sought to begin construction of their version of the Ram temple in Ayodhya on 15 March. Even if Mr Vajpayee had been Prime Minister of a BJP rather than a coalition government he could not have arbitrarily acceded to a demand violative of court injunctions; there was no way in which he could have compromised as leader of a coalition. In other words, if a temple were built in Ayodhya the government would fall in Delhi. To a

trident in his pocket, talk like Nathuram Godse and behave like Narendra Modi. But until we reach that horizon, Mr Singhal will have to settle for less ideal mortals. How does a Sonia Gandhi or a Chandra Shekhar or a V.P. Singh or a Chandrababu Naidu or any member of the long list of hopeful waiting to pick up the prime ministership from the debris of this coalition become more useful to Mr Singhal than an Atal Behari Vajpayee? Mr Vajpayee will at least maintain a dialogue, and

Ashok Singhal was, after all, ten years younger when he joyously participated in the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya and asking him to wait for another ten years might be asking for too much as far as he is concerned. (One can hardly eliminate the human element from was driven by passion). Ten years ago the prospect of BJP rule over India might have seemed a distant dream, but even the birth of this dream did not straighten the sag. A BJP Prime Minister has proved as

terror among Muslims through Ahmedabad, then, in the final analysis, it all unraveled and failed. As that old adage puts it quite neatly, you cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hound. The mobs of Ahmedabad and innumerable other cities and villages of Gujarat changed the chemistry of the reaction in Delhi and the country. If the Hindutva movement had reacted with prayer rather than punishment to Godhra, there would have been a national outpouring of sympathy of

the government: fire should not be left in the hands of novices. Nor should television cameras be left in front of them. As the "crisis" progressed it was evident that many of the leaders had fallen in love with the sound of their own voices. Hearing yourself on the box can be heady, particularly if no one listens to you normally. The man who called the Prime Minister a "new Mussalman" had clearly lost connectivity with his brain muscles. Mr Vajpayee brought the heat down with one sharp shower of cold reality. Within minutes the VHP had recognised the virtues of a court order.

The VHP believes that it has a deal; that the courts will give permission for it to have its cake and eat it too, to start construction of the temple on the "undisputed" land and protect the government with this court order. If life were only so simple.

Gujarat has poured acid on wounds that were once again beginning to fade. The BJP, which could claim that it had managed to control communal violence under its watch, is now as guilty as the governments of 1992 or 1984 or whoever and whenever looked the other way while mobs feasted on blood. The real challenge before Prime Minister Vajpayee now is to heal a nation that has had a cardiac relapse under his care; this attack was straight to the heart. Building a temple on land is easy compared to finding some space in the heart.

In his incarnation as a man Lord Ram was revered as the paragon of honour and justice. As a Lord, he would never accept worship in a temple built with bloodstained hands.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.



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growing number of people this seemed to be a cause for some alarm; to me, this confrontation was more amusing than real. All one had to do was apply the cold touch of common sense on the rhetoric, and the fizzle went flat.

One question was sufficient. How would it help the VHP, or any of the official and unofficial elements that were part of the temple movement, to bring down a government created around the central presence of the BJP? How would it help Mr Ashok Singhal to replace Mr Vajpayee with someone else? Mr Vajpayee may not be Mr Singhal's preferred choice for Prime Minister: in fact some VHP leader called the Prime Minister a "new Mussalman" which, presumably, is as low as it gets in the VHP vocabulary. Doubtless in Mr Singhal's ideal world the Prime Minister of India would carry a

hopefully push all concerned towards some semblance of shared decision-making: anyone else would draw a hard line in front of the VHP fairly quickly and let the dispute wait in the courtroom for as long as it takes.

Since it made no sense for the VHP to push the government so far that it would topple, there was never any serious danger of the government being in any genuine crisis. The simulated crisis was a show manoeuvred between a number of staging points.

The question invites itself: why stage such a show? The answers are many. The date itself was fixed long ago, so any immediate cause cannot be attributed to it. The VHP's continuing problem is what might be described as the sag factor: it has been promising a temple for too long without doing anything about it. Mr

reluctant to place a temple above the law as any of his predecessors. One immediate reason for the extraordinary stridency displayed by VHP leaders was clearly the environment created by the Gujarat violence, both at Godhra and its aftermath. The terrible death of *karsevaks* at Godhra gave the VHP a kind of moral legitimacy it had yearned for but never seemed to obtain, particularly from the middle class. Anguish does have that kind of fallout. But that anguish was soon overshadowed by the larger wall of lynch mobs permitted to kill and torch Muslims across Gujarat; no one had any right to any space on the moral high ground after that. If there was a crisis last week then it was propelled by the law of unintended consequences. The VHP leadership thought it could raise the temperature without scorching itself or, more dangerously, burning down

unparalleled proportions. It lost that chance when it could not cleanse hatred from its reaction.

Mr Vajpayee has a deceptively languorous approach to power. That stoic half-smile silence tends to give the impression that he either does not care or can be bullied. Everyone has his own style of management; Mr Vajpayee prefers elastic handcuffs for his flock. Make that very elastic. Elastic is the only band that can keep a blob of jelly under some form of control. But Mr Vajpayee also has a veteran's eye; he knows at which point the shifting mass of jelly that is government can spill out of control and then out of his hands. If there was a crisis last week then it was propelled by the law of unintended consequences. The VHP leadership thought it could raise the temperature without scorching itself or, more dangerously, burning down

## OPINION

# Reply to Kibria's 'open letter'

A K FAEZUL HUQ

I shall try to answer Mr Kibria's 'accusations' one by one expressed in his "open letter" published in The Daily Star on March 8. But before I proceed, I must confess that I am really unable to comprehend as to why should Mr. Kibria attach so much importance or give credence to an article written by someone whose words carry only 'some' weight. Simultaneously, I can't resist the elation, when I find that my article under reference has been creating "quite a stir", in spite of my insignificant credentials, compared to the extraordinary merit that Mr Kibria possesses. However, I was amazed to note that through this particular article I had not only challenged Sheikh Hasina's leadership but also "her commitment to the interests of the party that she leads," [as Mr. Kibria so strongly asserts].

"some criticism of the incumbent government" that he finds in my article, followed by 'the real purpose' of my writing that piece; then he goes on to mention about the 'scathing and harsh' words that I have used and finally discovers my "real target". Mr. Kibria, Sir: where did you get all this? Your sense of imagination, I must appreciate, transcends all boundaries, but you could have profitably used it elsewhere without wasting your precious time and energy on an absolutely innocuous piece of article.

Sir, you talk of party forum and other 'nice' things of life. Tell me honestly, is there any such thing as the 'party forum' in the Awami League, the BNP or for that matter in other 'so-called' liberal, democratic parties of our country? Isn't it always a one man or one-woman show? And my conscience Sir, of which you seem to know more than I do, in fact had almost continuously pricked me throughout the best part

of my stint as a Minister, when I repeatedly failed to draw the attention of my leader or even your kind self as the Finance Minister; only to retreat, with a broken heart to my own small world and curse my luck; because I knew, people had great expectations as far as I was concerned, but unfortunately I could neither deliver up to their expectations nor tell them why I was unable to do so.

But Sir, what about your conscience, which must have left you lurking in the dark, all alone in 1996 when you presided, with such ease, over the total destruction of the country's Stock Market? Many people had quite logically expected then, that with your sophisticated background you would resign immediately and take all the responsibility for the debacle and save the new government of all the accompanying embarrassments. Instead you almost threw a counter challenge and asked all of us to

wait; for you asserted that the index would never go below the 1500 mark knowing very little that the heavens had ordained otherwise and sent it [i.e. the index] down below the 490 mark!

And your attempt to bracket me with the anti-independence forces of 1971 Sir, is most unfortunate and uncalled for, simply because of your scanty knowledge of the trauma and the tribulations through which I had to pass [then], including my confinement at Lyallpur [Pakistan] during that turbulent period of '71. Please Sir, do not try to bring in extraneous matters which have no relevance whatsoever to the subject that we are discussing.

As far as my defence of the former President is concerned, I prefer to stick to my guns, since I think, neither my premise was wrong nor the conclusions thereof, because mere refusal by the former President to sign certain bills -- important or unimportant -- made no

difference whatsoever, since neither was he acting unconstitutionally nor did it matter at all if the bills were sent back to him for the second time despite his continued refusal, for then " it is deemed to have been signed". However, I do agree with you, Sir, on one point, and that is his unwise decision to read the BNP prepared text in the Parliament without expunging the political tirade against the AL, which was certainly not in good taste. And that is one point which drew the attention of all and sundry.

Sir, you are talking of an un-constitutional Ordinance; probably you are referring to the amended People's Representation Order of 1972. But as far as my memory goes, it was further amended as soon as a hue and cry was raised by us and Barrister Amirul Islam made all preparations to move the Hon'ble High Court. Later, after that quick amendment, it appeared that everything had died down.

Sir, I must protest and tell you very strongly once again that I made no public attack on our party leader; rather I sincerely tried to remind her of certain mistakes that we all collectively committed; a fact which may sound most unpalatable, but is nevertheless historically 100 per cent true. Accordingly I made certain concrete suggestions for re-vamping the party after the unfortunate election debacle.

Sir, you are absolutely mistaken when you talk of an imaginary debate centering around Sheikh Hasina's dedication and commitment to the party (AL) and the people of Bangladesh. As a matter of fact, it seems, you are purposely trying to flare up Sheikh Hasina's anger to a very uncomfortable point by bringing in irrelevant subjects to the forefront. Nobody disputes her able handling of the worst floods of 1998 or her frequent visits to the distressed people and families at the time of various calamities, and I

have personally seen her working very hard indeed during all those five years as the Prime Minister; but that is exactly why people's query mounts and her conspicuously silent role comes into focus; that was observed minutely and compared, after the October/November [2001] atrocities.

And finally, you want to know about my movements, after the October 2001 election, to my constituency. True, I did not go out anywhere; not even to neighbouring Narayanganj, obviously due to the prevailing tense situation at that time which did not permit me to take chances. Our workers were being beaten and hunted, and there was absolutely nothing that one could do. But one thing was remarkable -- whether you accept it or not. At least I did not run away from the country, leaving behind the 70,000 supporters [of my area] who voted for me and lakhs of others who wish me well, day in and day out, unlike our

great AL leaders! And I vehemently protest at your unkind remarks when you say that an "orchestrated campaign" has been launched through me to malign her (Sheikh Hasina). Where did you get that Sir?

Lastly, permit me to quote two eminent men of our times who have so aptly said: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties". [John Milton]. We must also remember that, "Nothing dies so hard, or rallies so often, as intolerance". [Henry Ward Beecher]. Sir, I had a strange feeling that at least great men of wisdom and knowledge were not allergic to 'bare truth'. But I regret to say that I have been proved totally wrong.

A K Faezul Huq is a lawyer and former MP/Minister