LATE S. M. AL

DHAKA TUESDAY MARCH 19, 2002

We condemn the vicious attack on Pak church

The country must upgrade its internal security preparedness

HE lethal grenade attack on a prayer service at a Protestant church in Islamabad has left us dumbfounded and outraged, both beyond measure. The surprise stems from the fact that this has happened in a double-protected area. Islamabad being Pakistan's capital is the nerve-centre of the country's security surveillance system, which has shown a breach. And to top it off, the church which came under the gung-ho assault is in the diplomatic enclave, that at all times and in every country has the high security zone status. A stranger sneaked through the defences apparently slackened on a Sunday, the weekly holiday in Pakistan. They then tossed several grenades at the religious mass of mostly foreign nationals killing five instantaneously and leaving eight of the 49 injured souls in critical conditions. There has been talk of another intruder having appeared on the scene but 'who did not hurl any grenades'.

And, as if to create loops of words to wriggle through an embarrassing situation, a Pakistani official suggested that the 'unidentified' among the injured who were hospitalised might have had links with the terrorists.

The attack on any Christian church, or any Christian, for that matter, hasn't been without precedent in Pakistan. Last year this happened in Bhawalpur and there was some incident in Islamabad as well. But the Sunday's grenade attack on the church in a high security zone seemed designed to prove that foreigners, especially Americans -- among the dead were two US citizens are vulnerable to terrorist vengeance. Journalist Daniel Pearl's tragic end in the hands of his captors was a part of the vengeful pattern of terrorism witnessed since the US anti-terrorist war on Afghanistan and Pakistan's crackdown on Islamic extremist groups. This does not, however, launder terrorism, whatever its origin or shape.

The outlawed Islamic militant group Joeshe Muhammad's name has come up in the observations made by some reputed Pakistani political commentators in the wake of the latest attack. The outfit has had a sectarian track-record, too, some are apt to point out. To us fingerpointing is an exercise in futility so long as this is not followed up by the capture and punishment of the namespecific culprits, both front-men and their invisible employers. We say, let Pakistan reassess its vulnerability to snipe terrorist attacks and take adequate guard against suicide bomber missions that might be brewing for the country.

Death on highway just waiting to happen

But who cares?

HE circumstances that led to the accident on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway last Sunday are sadly familiar. Tyre of the front wheel bursts, the driver of the passenger bus loses control, the speeding vehicle skids off the road into a ditch and several passengers die. Similar incidents have occurred before. It was either a technical failure or a drunk driver or a bit of both. So frequently has death occurred on the highway that we have developed a fatalistic attitude towards this. Man has no control over accidents -- we console ourselves every time such an incident takes place. Hardly do we look into the criminal negligence of the bus owners that led to death of so many. Nor do we question the monitoring and regulatory failings of the road transport authorities that et submerged in the customary expressions of condolences. If we had, we would have concluded that these mishaps are no less than murders of innocent passengers. Cramming passengers into vehicles with flawed engines and accessories and allowing unqualified or temperamental wrecks on the driver's seat do constitute a crime, don't they?

Highway safety has never been the authorities' natural concern and one wonders whether it will ever be. The rate of fatal accidents on the highway in Bangladesh is among the highest in the world. Some years back there were talks of upgrading road safety management across the country. It seems there has not been any progress in that direction as yet. It is an open secret that a huge majority of the drivers who operate in the city and beyond possess forged licences. So is the fact that a huge number of vehicles ply with flawed engines and accessories. It should not be difficult for the authorities to make sure that these transport operators and these vehicles are off the road. All it takes is a little bit of commitment to the job they are paid to do. Their failure would only mean more death on the highway. Deep down their hearts they would know these were not mishaps but murders. Can they live in peace with such pricks?

In March, I remember Iqbal, a 'Bihari'



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

OMETIMES, often, when the vicious blades of the past slash our throats desperately demanding to tell their tales, to turn our memories into history, I wonder with the guile of the guilty, fingers resinated with blood and dust, of a past we can neither have nor hold. I often ask, whose history is it anyway? It's a trek of thirty years and we still can't describe the narration constructed with firewood of our

"AFTER the night of 25, there was a short lull. But on March 26 after the prayers were over a mob attacked our Mohammedpur home. Soon it was on fire. One son managed to slither down the pipes and escape. As we were struggling to leave our home to save our lives, a crowd burst in. One didn't know their number but they began to loot and plunder. And yet we found that two or three of them were trying to stop others. We managed to jump to the next house but injured ourselves badly. We knew death was close. My husband was being jostled away. Would I see him again?'

ZEBUN-NESSA BEGUM lived in what is known as Salimullah Road in that year. That day, that year her husband Md. Salimullah was knifed to death in the flaming roads of Mohammedpur. The house was peppered with gunshots and the building was torched and looted. Her family was dispersed in different directions and it was a long time before she was united with her children in a place away from the

frightened city's walls. She has strange memories of that time Years later they still cling to her yet her voice carries no bitterness and her presence is calming like that of all people who have deeply suffered and not been scarred.

"MY husband was killed and I wouldn't have made it either. As was being carried across the road I saw the dead body of my husband. He had said that they should kill him then and there. He was knifed in the descriptions of enemies and friends in a nationalist war? I tried to imagine labal and his few friends amidst the frenzy of Mohammedpur in March 1971 trying to save Bengalis. when slaughter was the king. What emotions moved labal and those like him to risk their lives to save those who had become enemies of the state and God? What kind of strength is needed to defy both? When neither God nor the State can bow down the glory of the con-

enemy too. Iqbal was a Bihari and dealt as the mathematics of history commanded.

"AFTER we returned home in 1971 after independence we had difficulties but we were helped by our friends. And then we came back and found our derelict home, ravaged beyond recognition. I looked for Igbal and learnt about his death. I then sought out the Punjabi family who had helped us, who had sheltered us in March-April 1971. They her husband was felled. She has no rage or contempt but I often wonder about a Bihari, the hated name that seems to become more intensely hated in this month. A couple of year back I was assigned by the BBC to track down a few Bihari woman who had experienced 1971. It took some hunting down but using my sources finally tracked down a lady who had a vivid memory of that year.

IN Dhaka's Geneva camp, amidst the howling filth and garbage lives when the mob came he said that he would shoot down anvone who crossed the courtyard. This man saved us all. "So do you hate Bangalis?"

"Why should I? Didn't a Bangal save us? There are good and bad people. I don't hate anyone. I did get to broadcast the inter-

view from the BBC. I am proud that I put that emotion on air for all to hear. So strange that after having personally suffered so much they have found no racial hatred within them

have often walked through the lanes and roads of Mohammedpur that magnificently strange part of the city where the past lives with the present and ancient hostilities nerge into new hatreds. Where history has been kept alive not so much in the names of the roads but in the deep-set memories of the people who live utterly unbelievable lives and time seems to have taken to bed and sleep out the night of

I am often on Iqbal Road. I know that this road is not named after a Bihari who risked his life to save Bengalis and was in turn killed by the partisans of Bengal in bursts of revenge after the war was over, but I would like to think so. As histories are written and redone in defining our kings and crowns, we have never thought of these men and women who with the power of the vanguished have ultimately con-

Whose history do we learn Who are the princes and lords of

time anyway? I salute Iqbal in his unfound

grave overwhelming the chariots of war with his silent chant of humanity

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

I had asked about Iqbal, this strange anonymous man who had in a perfectly simple manner defied the conventional notions of the enemy and become a supreme human being. I realise how we have made the word seem so common, so shorn of honour and dignity. In a world of wealth and guns, the humblest description of the ordinariness of being a human being above all who refuses the call to nationalist mayhem has no meaning except to those who wish to craft meanings out of humanity.

back and died from bleeding. I saw the neighbourhood was blazing, Bengali homes were in flames.'

AND yet she didn't die in what can only be a miracle of sorts or that demise wasn't part of the deadly calculus of the living and the dead. Some body protected her, gave her a few hours of shelter from the raging insane crowd fired by the powers of protecting their state. Who saved her?

"HIS name was Iqbal. He was a boy from the neighbourhood. He was a non-Bengali, a Bihari. He gave shelter in another neighbour's home as people went hunting for men and blood. He said that it wasn't safe to stay there. So he carried me and the rest of the children to the safety of a house of a family friend. He was also a non-Bengali. He protected us till we left for the rural areas."

WHEN I had first heard the story, the events and the strange encounters of people who seemed to overcome all racial stereotypes intrigued me. Who were these people who seemed to defy the conventional

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"WHAT happened to Iqbal?"

"After the war was over, I looked for him. I looked for the man who had saved my life. But I later learnt that after the war was over and the Mukti Bahini came, he was killed by Iqbal was an enemy. He was

killed by the enemy. One doesn't forget such facts even if that enemy has saved

enemy lives. Just as one was a Bengali and therefore an enemy in 1971 to the

Pakistani eyes, a Bihari was an

There was no question of doing anything else. The gentleman's father sent money from home and one day they managed to leave for Pakistan. With us they were safe. Just as we were safe with them in "Did you keep in touch?"

staved with us for almost a vear.

"His father sent a letter after they reached Pakistan. He wrote that he wanted to meet that Muslim family who had given shelter to his son even after the father of that family was killed and the army had killed

"Don't you hate Biharis? They killed your man." "Biharis didn't kill my husband

but some bad men did. I shall never hate Biharis. Will you hate Bengalis because there were Razakars?" I didn't answer.

THERE is some degree of assuaging grief for her as the government has renamed Salimullah Road once named after the Nawab of Dhaka, after her martyred husband -- Shaheed Salimullah -- and she still lives in the house where they had

once lived together as a family till

plus but looks much, much older as if her age is calculated by the years of memory that is piled on her. We talk about 1971. Were you personally affected, I ask. Before she even answers this question, he twists her broken body

Seher Bano (name changed) in a

two-room shanty almost colourful

with the collected junk. She is sixty

towards me. It is a misshapen part of the anatomy between belly and ribcage, as if it has been reformulated after the obvious bullet hole has redesigned the flesh where the bullet entered. The bullet which she

'It went through this part of the body. They fired from close range. They then looted our house.'

"Who looted your house?" "Who loots houses? The local people. There were two big thugs of Jaipurhat. They attacked us and other Bihari homes. They took away women and whatever they could lay their hands on. They shot us and left for dead. But they returned the next day. We would all have been killed.'

"Who saved you?" "A Bengali young man saved us He stood on the roof with a gun and

The election process



IKRAM SEHGAL writes from Karachi

HE election process is seen by the people according to their perception of things as they should be. Politicians see an October date as the end of their three years-drought in the cold, most intelligentsia see the approaching date as impending nom. There is even talk of a 1971. like situation post October 2002. The business community is somewhat ambivalent, caught between the devil and the deep sea. The Amjad-NAB was focussed on big business, the Khalid Magbool and Munir Hafeez-NABs follow different pursuits, taking the heat off the mercantile community. Leading to the question, would big business be comfortable with the Army's continuing governance in some form or go back to the barracks? For the broad expanse of the public the impending Elections evokes mixed reaction, people do want elected representatives, but more than that they want bread on their tables and a roof over their heads. It would be nice also to have money to pay for electricity and other utilities

Mai Gen Rashid Qureshi denied flatly that the military regime had any preferences among politicians, so what is the trio of political amateurs led by Tariq Aziz, Principal Staff Officer to the President, upto directing political traffic? They would be well advised not to enter where angels fear to tread, history has

shown that bureaucratic manipulation is a short term solution which invariably boomerangs. While the military cannot be deaf, dumb and blind about those who will guide the nation's destiny in the years to come, especially when politicians remained deaf, not-so-dumb but blind to the travails of the country and its people in the past, instead of manipulating an "acceptable result" by getting the "like-minded" elected surreptitiously, it would be far better to create a transparent level playing

the candidates who either won the election or were runner-up in 1997. The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) should then appoint a panel of about 25-30 Chartered Accountant (CA) firms for a summarized one/two page comparison of the Wealth Statements of these candidates with the Statements of Assets they filed when becoming a candidate in 1997. Discrepancies should be noted and reported to the Election Commission (EC) within 3 days by the designated CA firm. The EC

process. The law is there, we simply need to apply it. Can any country in the world, however, democratic their credentials, ostracize the election process as unfair if the politicians are found to have been making false statements under oath?

Now, comes the need for continuity. The military regime has a strong case for going back to Supreme Court to request a mechanism to ensure that the reforms are not reversed by the politicians and we end up on square one in the same

facto from the Supreme Court. If the SC approves, then a suitable clause must be inserted into the candidate's application form who by signing it confirms that he/she will not take any action by word, print or mouth to overturn his/her pledge. The President should simply maintain peace and harmony of the country and ensure that by making the election process transparent there is no nterference with the working of the

Any candidate with a solid vote

AS I SEE IT

There is nothing more effective in building up cohesiveness in the nation than to force candidates to break artificial barriers and for the voters to surmount these barriers to ensure that a candidate they want wins and the candidate they do not want loses and does not represent their interests in various political assemblies.

field.

To start with, forget having any Referendum, that will be a disaster. Less than 40 per cent of the electorate voted in the last General Elections, most reached to the voting booths by transportation arranged by the political parties. How many will turn out in the Referendum even if they love the President? If the Establishment can possibly manage the logistics of getting 20 per cent of the electorate to the booths and even if all of them voted positively, would the world believe the sanctity of the vote? Referendums in third world countries are only an exercise

It is too late to disqualify anyone through the NAB process if they have not been disqualified already. any attempt to do so will make the election process farcical in international perception. That in turn will make the three-years period mandated by the Supreme Court meaningless. The Central Board of Revenue (CBR) should give to the Election Commission (EC) Income & Wealth Tax Statements (of 1997) of

should appoint "Asset Verification Tribunals", each Bench compromising 3 retired judges of the High Court, each tribunal assisted by a qualified CA to scrutinize the findings of the CA firm, not more than 15 cases before each tribunal. If the discrepancies noted by the CAs are minor infringement or because of genuine human error they should condoned. If not then the candidate should stand disqualified. The candidate should have right of appeal before "Asset Verification Appeal" Benches constituted by the Chief Justices of the Provincial High Courts. Similarly, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SC) should appoint SC "Asset Verification Appeal" Benches for quick disposal of any final appeal. If the procedures start on or around April 1. these could be completed within 60 days i.e. before May 31, 2002. By this transparent cleansing process those who have perjured themselves under oath will be disqualified, and the military will have kept themselves not only neutral but clear of the entire disqualification

morass we were heading for on Oct 12, 1999. The only way to prevent backslide (and another army coup) would be to maintain continuity. The five year period should be counted from the June 2001 date that the President took office, i.e. upto June 2006. Mian Nawaz Sharif almost managed a civil war, a few years earlier Ms Benazir had different ideas from the President. Politicians cannot be allowed to manipulate the appointments of the senior hierarchy of the military, particularly the COAS. The even-handed NAB process should not be interrupted. the governing politicians will only target their enemies. The shortcomings (and my own reservations) of plea bargaining notwithstanding, the fact remains that NAR has been relatively very successful in the process of accountability. National Security being a vital part of concern, a National Security Council (NSC) must be headed by the President. Therefore, the Armed Forces, NAB and NSC should remain directly under the President. The President must seek approval ipso bank of 20-25 per cent from his caste, sect, ethnicity, etc will win in the present "first past the post" system. The government must bring in "run-off elections". Voter apathy is prevalent because the voter has come to believe that his/her vote does not count. No candidate should get elected unless he/she gets more than 50 per cent of the vote in the first round. Without that there has to be a "run-off election" between the first two candidates. Once elected. the candidate tends to forget his own loyal constituents, what to talk of the majority of the voters that did not vote for him/her. This method will force the candidate to reach out to the balance 75-80 per cent who do not belong to his caste, sect, ethnicity, etc, moreover he cannot dismiss them as irrelevant, other than the period of the election itself. Irrespective of affiliation other than political. the voters will combine to keep the man or woman they want in or out of Parliament, this will bring in homogeneity in the country. Those who today are unbeatable candidates today may not survive a run-off

second round money will influence the election in favour of the wealthy can be countered by having a guick No two round within one week of the first vote. Pakistan's can eradicate diversion on racial, caste and sectarian lines by inculcating homogeneity in this manner, the "run-off election" forces the candidate to reach out outside his immediate circle of votes or risk being voted out. There is nothing more effective in building up cohesiveness in the nation than to force candidates to break artificial barriers and for the voters to surmount these barriers to ensure that a candidate they want wins and the candidate they do not want loses and does not represent their interests in various political assemblies. Pervez Musharraf can win a

election. The argument that in a

Presidential election at this time nands down and he needs no manipulation by the amateur political artists who think politicians are malleable like putty that they can mold in secret to any shape and form they want. Such an election will be called a farce by the opposition, so why waste the President's time and that of the country in such a futile exercise? He must remain above the fray of the political process and keep the Armed Forces out of it. As long as he has the vital factors concerning national security in his strong hands, this country has a fair

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

On Bannya's reply

When I saw your note that you have Bannya's reply with you and it would be published in full I wondered what could be the singer's reply.

I thought may be she will just say sorry and then I thought may be she will try to justify that the word 'dhar' instead of 'dar' is also correct or that she will come out with an acceptable explanation. But never in my wildest dream, I thought she would blame the 'poor recording system' that changed her word 'dar' into 'dhar'.

What a marvellous reasoning! The singer's logic though ridiculous but was quite amusing. Any comment Mr. Karim? Nafeeza Yasmin **Dhaka University**

I am very happy that you pubished Bannya's letter. Anybody involved with the recording business would know that what Bannya replied regarding 'poor recording system' is possible. Someone like

Bannya who has spent years learning the music formally would know what the words are. I hope this will put an end to the letters on Bannya from people who just use her as an excuse to see their name in print. Ruhul Karim Manna

I refer to the reply of Ms. Rezwana Chowdhury Bannya regarding the allegation made by Mr. Nazmul Karim and followed by many

I wonder how can she be so certain about the 'cause' of distortion? Can she validate that "bad sound quality" has changed the word "daar" into "dhar"? Does she believe in what she is trying to justify? Does she know what she is trying to rationalise?

I assume all these stories she is making just to uphold her reputation but where will be her so-called pride if the disc is sent to a technical committee expertise on sound recording and it is found the other-Faridul Huda

Hawaii, U.S.A

Learning languages

A persisting debate is going on whether Arabic should be a compulsory subject or not. This debate is not very interesting because a number of correspondents have mixed up religion with the subject. Any academic polemics must be done with adequate knowledge of the subject devoid of any prejudice. Moreover no person with rigid and orthodox ideas can contribute anything towards a healthy discussion. There is no harm in learning Arabic as a language. It is a very rich and melodious language. But when someone says that since the Quran was revealed in this language all the Muslims must learn this language does not make much sense. Some very reliable translations are there in so many languages that any one who does not know Arabic can read

the Quran and understand it. The most dangerous thing about

religion is to preach dogmas. No knowledge is perfect knowledge until it passes the test of compari-



A time to learn?

son. A truly knowledgeable person is open to questions and verifications.

should be free like a bird and his horizon of vision should be endless

Ignorance is the mother of all evils. In this age of logic and practical As Khalil Gibran said that a fool is philosophy, there is no place for dogma. Life is undergoing revolumore dangerous than a calfless tionary transformation everyday. bear. Love of religion should bring a The vista of knowledge is expanding, man asking questions, a lot of our old ideas are becoming obsolete. We must not preach something, which will not stand in the test of times. Many of the esteemed writers may not like this but it is said that 'A truly religious person does not embrace any religion'.

Akbar Hussain

Toronto, Canada

EDITOR TO THE

Foot over-bridge: a merchant of death

Heart aches to think the way those innocent people lost their lives under the concrete slab of the so-called flyover at Science Laboratory the other day. I have simply lost my language to condemn the crimes committed by the City Corporation in connivance with the bloodthirsty contractors of Surma International. What a

country we live in! A mindless contractor keeps on killing innocent citizens in a series of similar crimes and gets away with it! Is this only because the contractor is of the ruling party? Where is this country heading? I myself been watching this shoddy fly-over being built for years (which takes three months to build in a civilised country though) and gasped at the impending horror by seeing how carelessly balanced the slabs were. Every time I crossed that fly-over I used to speed away out of fear.

I wonder why couldn't these slabs be made of steel to install quickly and at a much lower cost. Worse still, when that police official informed the City Corporation of the tilted concrete block, why didn't they pay heed to him? And how come (as the Mayor said) a blacklisted contractor carries on with his construc-

Would the government please concentrate on the people and their safety and security?

Shah Mushtaque Ahmed Lake Circus, Kalabagan, Dhaka

The new Volvo bus love the new Volvo buses. Nice

TO THE EDITOR

colour, no noxious smoke belching out, no people hanging like monkeys from the door, which actually stays By the way, the buses are CNG

aren't they? **Bastiat** Dhaka

Cabinet reshuffle Anyone could have predicted that Dr

oyeen Khan would have to go. From a non-partisan view, he is an educated gentleman, cultured and sophisticated in his outlook.

Totally at odds with the rest of this

aovernment.