

INDIA

The Gujarat carnage

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER in Mumbai

A visit to Gujarat is a shattering experience for any sensitive soul. It is more than a month and it still continues to burn. The brutalities are of such a nature that one feels Gujarat has not entered an age of enlightenment or if it ever entered it has exited from it and has entered an era of darkness. Gujarat is an embodiment of brutality today with some honourable exceptions.

The opposition parties are demanding only removal of Narendra Modi. It is not enough; in fact Narendra Modi Government should be dismissed and President's rule should be promulgated. Many ministers of this Narendra Modi Government are deeply involved in organising the genocide. Mr. Zadaphia, Home Minister and Harin Pandya, the revenue Minister were seen by many eye-witnesses with the marauding mobs. Some FIRs also have mentioned their names.

As long as this Government is in power the victims and survivors can hope for no justice. The police is either not recording FIRs or framing very minor charges against the looters and murderers.

The Gujarat carnage is an attack on Indian democracy, its diversity and pluralism. India has been plural, not since it adopted democracy and became a republic in 1950. India has been plural for ages and it always has been proud of its rich pluralist legacy. The Indian pluralism is anchor sheet of our secularism. We cannot think of our secular democracy without pluralism.

But what has happened in Gujarat in last more than a month is a concerted assault on this pluralism. Muslims are sought to be completely isolated in ghettos and looked down upon as if non-Indians. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad and its cohorts are distributing pamphlets on large scale with the blessings of the present Government for economic boycott of Muslims not to sell to them and not to buy from them. There are many who are also implementing it. A Hindu doctor was stabbed by an unidentified person and these doctors decided not to practise in Muslim areas. But when a Muslim doctor was murdered no such hue and cry was raised. No one even showed such concern.

Many Hindu employers have already asked their Muslim employees not to come for work. The VHP enthusiasts are going round various schools and threatening its headmasters and principals to remove Muslim students

from their rolls. It sends chilling sensation down one's spine what will happen if Muslim students are really removed from schools under threat from VHP and Bajrang Dal. The ghettoisation will be complete.

It is BJP and RSS people who never tire of accusing Muslims that they refuse to be a part of 'Indian mainstream'? Though this is not true but even if true who is responsible for their being out of stream. If they are expelled from Government and private schools will they not be driven into madrasa shells? The Government of Gujarat under the leadership of Narendra Modi is, it appears, silently encouraging the VHP enthusiasts to implement their plan of Hindu India, at least presently in Gujarat. This should not be taken lightly by those who care for secular character of Indian democracy. If it happens, even if partially, it will be the beginning of end of our pluralism and our secular democracy.

Today one can also see how administration surrenders itself to the fascist forces under their rule. For the Gujarat Government Indian Constitution does not exist. So much for the administrative machinery in Gujarat. The administration obeys all illegal and extra-constitutional orders of government of Gujarat. Anyone who insists on the rule of law is instantly transferred. Mr. Harsh Mandar, a conscientious IAS officer, was so disgusted with this state of affairs that he resigned in sheer disgust. He had written a very moving piece on the Gujarat carnage.

Like administration the police force has also proved to be quite obliging. Many observers have described it as a matter of shame for the police force. When the ex-director general of police Shri Julio Ribeiro visited Gujarat many top police officers avoided to meet him out of this sense of shame. He said in an interview, "Normally when I go to Gujarat senior police officers come to see me. This time, they tried to avoid me." When he was asked what was the reason for the failure of the police in Gujarat he said that "The top brass must take the blame. I did not sense a shift of leadership from the top police officers. Senior officers have been reduced to mute spectators as they have little control over the force." (TOI, Mumbai, 10th April 2002)

I also spoke to a top police officer in Ahmedabad who himself has been a victim of Modi Government for being duty conscious. He was transferred because he did not allow riots to take place in his jurisdiction. He confirmed what Ribeiro has said in the above interview. And many lower officers and constabulary had full sympathy with the marauding mobs. Several victims of the violence told me that the police blocked their way and the mobs

attacked them and burnt their relatives alive. And if they tried to run police fired on them.

The constant propaganda against Muslims that they are the enemies and anti-nationals and must be taught a lesson also had its effect. The VHP, in order to fight Muslims with the help of dalits expresses 'solidarity' with them as Hindus and instils in them a strong dose of Hinduness de-emphasising their dalitness in such situation. In the political strategy of Hindutva dalits' support is important not only for Muslim carnage but also win elections with their support assigning them subordinate position.

They have also worked out strategy to buy dalit leadership by accommodating them in power structure. Be it Mayawati or Paswan, after arousing fury of dalit masses against the BJP and upper caste Hindus, have worked out their equations with the upper caste leadership. These dalit leaders, Mayawati and Paswan and likes of them kept quiet throughout Gujarat carnage. Mayawati when asked about it quipped 'and what about Godhra incident?' Only those dalit leaders still outside power structure continue to show their anger against the upper caste Hindus. Thus it will be seen that politically Dalit-Muslim unity has never been very effective.

Another thing one should note is that there is lot of concern among people outside Gujarat for peace, harmony and secularism as never before. Many Gandhians who had kept mum during earlier riots are protesting this time and actively working for restoration of peace. The peace meeting in Ahmedabad which was convened by Mallika Sarabhai and disturbed by the VHP men was well attended from all over India. Chunnibhai Vaidya, a prominent Gandhian from Gujarat is working for peace for which he is receiving many threatening calls.

There have been protests against the carnage throughout India, which is very hopeful sign. Though the BJP might have gained in Gujarat it will suffer reverses elsewhere in India. The allies of BJP in NDA will also undoubtedly suffer. They made noises here and there just for public consumption but showed no genuine concern for peace in Gujarat. The TDP, though worried about Muslim votes in Andhra Pradesh, has spoken out only after all damage was done in Gujarat. So has Paswan. It will certainly not go down well with their electorates.

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NEPAL Future imperfect

Nepal has been pushed back 50 years. -- Prem Narayan Premi, DDC Chairman of Okhaldhunga



BINOD BHATTARAI

Despite the fashionable cynicism in the capital, Nepal had made dramatic progress in the past two decades. Child mortality has been halved in 20 years, goitre which was endemic is nearly gone, and 80 percent of the population has safe drinking water.

All this was made possible because elected village and district officials were becoming increasingly accountable, and some central policy was working. But the advances of the past 20 years are now threatened by systematic attacks by Maoist rebels against development projects, elected bodies and infrastructure.

The destruction has a snowball effect. Attacks on hydropower plants, for instance, don't just deprive villages of electricity it disrupts the cold chain for vaccination programmes. Women, children and the poorest bear the brunt of the impact.

"Children and women suffer the most in conflicts," UNICEF's Stephan McNab told us in an interview. "When a water supply system is blown up, it is again women who have to fetch it from somewhere up the hill." McNab has proposed that schools be declared "zones of peace", but no one seems to be listening.

It is clear that Nepal's progress in child health and literacy is going to take a beating if the attacks continue at this pace.

"Our development has been pushed back 50 years," says Prem Narayan Premi, DDC chairman of Okhaldhunga. "The devastation in Rumjatar and the villages around it will make you want to weep." Two weeks ago, Maoists wrecked Rumjatar's brand new water supply system, cutting the intake pipes and threatened to cut off the limbs of anyone who tried to repair the Rs 18 million project which had taken ten years to build.

In the past two weeks, 25 VDC buildings in Lamjung have been destroyed. "I don't know how and when we'll rebuild them," says MP Hari Bhatta Adhikary. In Lamjung's Dhuseni village, the building was not just the VDC office, but also housed a health post and post office. Some locals pleaded with the Maoists to spare the building. They were told: "Our orders are to destroy them, we don't care what happens."

It is hard to understand why the Maoist leadership has methodically targeted water supply and VDC buildings, since it affects ordinary people. Even in remote Humla district, 27 VDC buildings

have been destroyed, only Simikot remains. Water supply lines have been cut. Last week, Humla's dynamic DDC Chairman, Jivan Shahi had his home burnt to cinders, his property and livestock looted. In a phone interview from Simikot on Wednesday, Shahi told us: "I don't care what happens to me, but the Maoists are really hitting the poorest of the poor. It is now wholesale plunder and vandalism on an unprecedented scale."

In Kathmandu there appears to be little interest to gauge the implication of this nationwide pillage. No government agency is even keeping a tally of the destruction. Only at the National Planning Commission did we get a hint of concern: officials admitted the normal planning cycle now needs to be totally revised. "We are considering a shorter emergency plan to rebuild and rehabilitate," Jagdish Chandra Pokhrel of the NPC told us. "We are already looking at 2-3 years of reconstruction before we can get back to regular development."

In the donor community, there is a feeling of despondency and frustration. "The panic, fear and terror has effected the overall development climate," says Peter Rhode, director of the German aid group, GTZ. "Our partners are vanishing, VDCs are decreasing and local officials are fleeing either because they have been threatened or for fear of violence." It's not just that future progress has been stymied, but Nepal's development parameters will soon start regressing. For instance, the child mortality rate which had come down to 100 per 1,000 live births from nearly double that figure 20 years ago could start rising again. Immunisation rates could go down again from 90 percent to 70.

"This year we can only do about 60 percent of what we would have," says Sanjay Adhikary of UNDP. He heads a project that does social mobilisation in many of the hotspots of the midwest. "Work is challenging, but development must go on."

But it is not only the Maoists causing problems. "It appears that both sides are using 'food as weapon,'" says Douglas Coutts, representative, World Food Program. "All that is happening in the most food insecure areas." This hits the poor hardest.

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PAKISTAN

The paradoxes

MB NAQVI writes from Karachi

CONDITIONS in Pakistan always seem paradoxical to all: there is a military dictatorship in the saddle and yet there has been a press that is, by most standards, free. That the two do not gel needs no emphasis. But for a long time - two and a half years are a long time in Pakistan - the two did coexist. But an incident took place in Faisalabad in the second administration-organised public meeting that President candidate Pervez Musharraf addressed that showed that things were reverting to type.

The incident comprised a diatribe by Punjab's Governor Lt. Gen. Khalid Maqbool against the press for mis-reporting the president's first Jalsa in Lahore. The pressmen present protested and began stagging a walkout. At that point, on a cue from on high police started a lathi charge on the pressmen, injuring about 23, three of them so seriously as a newsman was in ICU for over 24 hours.

The Governor's complaint was that the press as a whole had underestimated the sea of human and talked merely of a score of thousands or so.

Earlier people had seen straws in the wind. The President himself had left no one in doubt just before start of his whistle-stop campaigning while addressing editors and senior columnists in Islamabad that they should stop sitting on the fence and that "you are with me or against me". That was more than a mere straw. This latest incident is almost a whole tree flying in the gale. Earlier straws too pointed the same direction. But no one took them too seriously. Press itself made a few adverse comments, more or less, on the high handedness of the officials of intelligence agencies. In any case, criticism was muffled and did not point to any policy of the state. There were many cases of arrests and manhandling of newsmen and in mafussil down, mostly in Sindh

and Punjab. It was earlier believed that these incidents were isolated and were of a hot headedness of local administration -- typical of what happens during an unaccountable regime. In retrospect it all seems so true to type: If the administration does not able to suppress the press freedom as such, newsmen can be intimidated, coerced and physically beaten up to scare others.

The press has now woken up and is quite uneasy. Most newspapers are controlled by owner-editors who are a class by themselves, mostly vested interests bound up these of the government. But they have criticised the government on the treatment to newsmen, still in polite and moderate tones. But working journalists are now in full cry. Processions have in fact been taken out from various press clubs in Punjab's major towns. The Karachi Press Club, one of the largest, staged a big show on Wednesday (Apr 17) where fiery speeches were

made by the various union leaders.

Despite owner-editors, the press has a tradition of opposing dictators albeit with trepidation. It has done repeatedly. Worst periods for it were in the 1960s and again in 1980s; the two decades of regimentation and enforced conformity under Generals Ayub Khan and Ziaul Haq. But working journalists in the precincts of their press clubs remained untamed, even if the printed word did not reflect any rebellions sentiments - thanks in part to editors and in part to the fiat of the government, backed by draconian laws.

But periods of relative freedom too were under military dictatorships, though these were short-lived. Gen. Yahya Khan virtually overthrew Ayub Khan and this allowed press to write freely whatever it pleased until March 1971 crackdown on erstwhile East Pakistan. After that he snuffed out all press freedom, though it appeared that the press was actually in harmony with the dictator. The second

time it happened was in Ziaul Haq's initial year who later went on to enforce a pre-censorship on every word that was printed, which system remained in force for several years.

The record of press freedom in Pakistan is extraordianly mixed. Most civilian governments have had an adverse relationship with the press. The only complication was that in the earliest phase, the editors, leading newsmen and the government had all belonged to the same Muslim League and there was in fact no opposition except a few cases by the left-wing papers. Later, conformity was enforced by Ayub Khan. Every socalled democratic government - they all belonged either to Muslim League or PPP - never had any real preference for a free press; all hankered after a docile press that supported and praised them. The brief months of freedom when Generals Yahya, Zia and Musharraf took over were welcome exception. But each time it proved to be only interlude. A night

of conformity and regimentation descended for long years. Would the same happen this time too? It is not necessarily ordained.

For one thing, press freedom, relative certainly, has lasted more than ten years. Many sections of the press intend to remain free, though there are contrary indications from certain owner-editors. The working journalists of course can be depended upon to give a good fight. The most uncertain element in the situation is the subjective assessment of many that "things have changed" and that old style censorship and conformity cannot be enforced again in the same old way. One hesitates to repeat it, much less to fully believe in it. But it may be, just may be, true. Another argument is about repeating itself several times in tragic-farcical farces or farcical tragedies. It is too tempting to fall for.

MB Naqvi is a noted columnist in Pakistan.

SULTAN AHMED

THE third meeting of finance and planning ministers of SAARC countries ended in Islamabad last week after drawing up an action plan to fight poverty in the region and the factors that caused it.

While SAARC ministers have agreed on numerous steps to be taken jointly, the more important steps to fight poverty have to be taken domestically. But it is easier to agree on lofty goals than on specific measures and details, and even more on effective methods of implementing them in a volatile political climate.

The five major steps for reducing poverty like containing corruption, ensuring good governance, transparent use of public funds, improving official procurement process and bringing improvements in the police and judicial systems, have to be taken by the governments of each of the seven SAARC states in a manner that really works in each country. And such steps need to be taken by each country irrespective of whether SAARC makes such

demands on them or not in a region where around 40 per cent of the people live below the poverty line of a dollar a day.

In Sri Lanka there has been the protracted civil war between the Sinhalese led government and the Tamils which now seems heading for a solution. In Nepal there has been a protracted murderous conflict between the government and Maoists which claims a large number of lives each week.

In Pakistan the sectarian strife has made many lives perish. Until recently it was said that women would make better and more peaceful rulers. That view has changed following the number of wars women rulers have indulged in. Bangladesh provides a glaring example of two women who have ruled the country alternately against each other and never made peace between themselves. So the Bangladesh economy suffers and the poor suffer far more.

The poor are now told by the agents of the World Bank and IMF they are less poor than they seem as the purchasing power of their rupee is far more than earnings in the West. But for the man engulfed in

in a survival economy or who lives on a dollar a day or less, that brings no relief at all. The purchasing power parity of the rupee may bring some relief to the middle class, or middle class income groups, but not to the poorest and the unemployed who commit suicide after prolonged unemployment.

The finance and planning ministers of SAARC have met three times in the past. And they are to meet again next year in Sri Lanka to finalise the modalities for implementing their decisions taken in Islamabad. But they cannot achieve any great results unless the top leaders of SAARC meet at a summit long before that and grapple with the issues identified.

The summit has to agree on reducing mutual tension and conflicts, particularly possible military conflicts or fearsome face-off. They have to agree on reducing force levels and in cutting down their huge military expenditure. Such expenditure takes the bread off the mouth of the poor and milk off the mouths of babies. But the Indian premier Atal

Behari Vajpayee is not ready to meet the Pakistani president. And if they do meet at a SAARC summit, they would not discuss bilateral issues however important or urgent. In the light of such obduracy the excellent decisions by the finance ministers at Islamabad last week have small significance.

The finance ministers have decided to make a great many collective demands on Western countries. They want the rich countries to check the flight of illegal capital from the SAARC region to their banks and persons from the region living there with their illegal deposits from here to be brought to justice.

They want the member states of the rich Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) to raise their aid level to the developing countries to 0.7 per cent of their GDP, as resolved by the UN General Assembly instead of the US giving 0.1 per cent and Britain 0.2 per cent, which they intend to increase only marginally now.

They want the donors to come up

with debt relief and debt swap for social sector development for SAARC states.

The SAARC states also propose to make a reality of the South Asia Free Trade Zone. How can we ask for greater market access to other countries when we deny that ourselves to other SAARC states? But progress in this area has proved to be tough, particularly between India and Pakistan because of Pakistan's apprehensions.

The package that the SAARC seeks from the rich countries covers debt relief, debt swaps for financing social sector development, fair larger assistance and at vastly concessional rates, if not as outright grants, greater market access to the West and prevention of flight of capital illegally from the region to the West. That means such steps need not only official initiatives but also non-official cooperation, like those of banks and investment institutions.

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Thereafter we were taken to a place to have breakfast. Harris complained to Daya Master about the way both of us were checked. However, we did not get any reply except a smile and Daya Masters invitation for both of us to have breakfast with him. We were then taken to Killinochchi where most journalists stayed. It was also the so-called press secretariat. We were checked again along with others, they removed the film roll again from the camera and photographed us again. We flashed our toothpaste smiles. The waiting game began again.

There was tiger music, fanfare and much more. But, I missed my favourite song "Prabhakaran, Prabhakaran" before the press conference.

In Killinochchi, it was tiger time. Nearly 200 journalists, fighting for a ringside view of the tiger leader waited in anticipation. Tigers were getting a heavy dose of medicine from members of the fourth estate.

They were keen to protect their leader from the media. They said their leaders security concerns were of great importance while the story was of

more importance to us. We were not going to shoot him with AK 47 but with

our flashguns and our pens. Press conference was getting delayed; lack of space was a prime factor. Mr. George, the LTTE compere asked for patience and for forgiveness and to understand their limitations and their problems. He also warned us not to make any suspicious move