

A frightening trend

Must be prevented from growing

THE report on the "closing" of two sub-inspectors of the city's Uttara Thana on charges of defying a court order to take a child to jail is alarming. Instead the child was taken to the Thana and the family told that the child would be tortured unless money was paid, a part of which was done. Remand was not granted by the court as the accused was a child. But the cops defying the court order took the child to the Thana and beat him up while making their ransom demand. To try to realize money by beating up a child is an act at such a level of barbarity that it defies normal conventions of civilization.

Two things stand out. Remand has become an opportunity for those who have the power for extra-judicial considerations. This could be physical revenge, extra-legal confessions or plain and simple blackmail. The law and order regime is swiftly descending to become a tool for the powerful to apply extreme coercion on the less powerful. But what is much more dangerous and fear generating is the trend of ignoring court orders. This is the worst news possible.

No regime is without these kinds of terrible examples but the alarm bells ring because two lowly policemen can dare to take a child into custody and torture him to extort money at the police station which is supposed to be a safe place.

It's no use ignoring the fact that once a court order is defied, a trend of ignoring them is set in motion. And if the court system too becomes an institution that can be ignored, nothing really remains to sustain the platform on which the republic stands. This incident might just look like the act of two brutal low ranked law and order staff doing something on the sly but the act denotes the crumbling state of the judiciary and the strength of those who can defy it. This is frightening. This must be contained for good.

There is no substitute to strict application of the rule of law. Just as there were these two crooked cops, there was an honest magistrate who read the law and saw the evidence and knew that children can't be sent on remand. Such awareness is to be lauded and other acts that defy the legal system punished harshly.

Sri Lanka-Bangladesh relationship

Potential for peace and growth

S Sri Lanka makes a slow journey towards a possible peace the wings of diplomacy are also slowly flapping to soar. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando has told Dhaka media that the cease fire signed with the belligerent LTTE is still in force and the final route to peace will be possibly negotiated in Thailand next month. Meanwhile, exploring potential areas of cooperation have begun.

Two areas of cooperation have already been identified and they relate to peacekeeping efforts and pharmaceutical sector. Bangladesh has established credibility in these sectors globally and its success in the pharmaceutical could well be its major economic story of the new decade. Peace keeping in the times of war is a despondent harvest to reap but the fact that peace has been kept, relatively and otherwise shows the need for more organized activities in this sector.

Bangladesh should pay great heed to the Sri Lankan experience because even when it was bleeding from its internal war, it managed to post a very healthy rate of GDP. Its growth potential is enormous and even in its worst day, its bourse was one of the best organized in South Asia. Sri Lanka is one of the best examples of a small country with an extremely high skilled population that has overcome many odds. In times of peace it will truly flourish. And that may well not be too far.

We believe that Bangladesh has better chances of cooperation with Sri Lanka than many other South Asian countries. Even today, the linkages between the two are very strong and the presence of the Sri Lankans in the ready made garments sector shows that roots of relationship are already there and they can be taken advantage of. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are no strangers to each other and that's why there is a possibility that inspires hope. A people who can walk so far to peace after having strolled with war for so long always will have much to offer just as Bangladesh too will have the same in other quarters.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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Col Akbar vs the Danes

I find one of the comments by the Danish foreign ministry under-secretary very strange. Your paper quotes him as saying to the BBC that this is the first incidence of any Bangladeshi official trying to resort to any sort of corruption in Danish assisted projects! The Daily Star Danish National Day supplement (April 16) proudly mentioned that Denmark has been involved in development work in Bangladesh since '71.

Therefore since 1971 this is the first time that anyone has allegedly tried to resort to corruption?

It would also appear, further down your news report that the Danes are threatening to curtail cooperation in other sectors if their allegations against the Minister are not taken at face value. Sounds like

browbeating to me.

Although I am all for the sacking of at least a third of the jumbo cabinet, it should not be done on the basis of allegations of corruption. The only lesson that would instil is, "don't get caught". Ministers should be sacked for nepotism, inefficiency and redundancy. If allegations of corruption are brought against certain ministers, it should be investigated.

It is also a sign of a healthy democracy if some senior politicians start vying for the Colonel's job. That's what politicians are for. **Beowulf**
Dhaka

FEER and Danish allegation-- could we handle it better!

When the horrendous handling of the FEER article issue still

Zahir Shah in Afghanistan: Challenging mission



HARUN UR RASHID

him to lime light as he was considered 'a light in a dark tunnel' in a messy situation in Afghanistan. The international community needed a respectable figure who could stand as a symbol of unity for all the tribes of Afghanistan -- Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen and Hazara -- of about 18 million people in the country.

Zahir Shah's immediate role is to preside over a *Loya Jirga* (the traditional Afghan grand assembly consisting of more than 1500 dele-

ges) which is expected to be held sometime in June to elect another interim government for next 18 months. The interim government will pave the way for a regularly elected government in the country. Zahir Shah in presiding over the *Jirga* will be in a position to influence the agenda and deliberations of it. Even his advice is likely to be sought about the composition of the new interim government.

Although Zahir Shah is a Pashtun, his family speaks Dari (Persian). His reign continued to be

peaceful and during his reign Afghanistan was coming out of a 'shell'. He introduced administrative, legislative and judicial reforms in the country. Women had played a significant role in many sectors in the community. Some of Afghan diplomats and jurists won eminent positions in the UN agencies for their notable contributions in their respective fields. Ambassador Paszak and Ambassador Tabibi were well-known personalities in the UN circles for their considered

the President and Prime Minister of the republic. He also established a one-party rule.

There is a view that the King had an opportunity to lead the country to a modern democracy but he failed to do so because of his lack of determination. Some argue that much of Afghanistan's troubles in later years could have been avoided if he led a stable path of democratic change in the country. It opened the way for those who wanted to take Afghanistan down

first one appears to be that the US war on terrorism is not over in Afghanistan despite US ferocious bombing runs in November and December. The Al-Qaeda 'terrorists' and Taliban forces continue to regroup and attack the American troops. Britain has sent recently elite forces to reinforce American troops to flush out the Al-Qaeda fighters from caves in high mountains. The war may degenerate into unwinnable guerrilla conflicts fought by foreign troops in foreign

domination of Tajiks in the government. Zahir Shah has to ensure that the next government is constituted in such a way that is not dominated by one tribe.

The third one is that Afghanistan has to maintain a delicate balance in foreign relations with all six neighbours -- Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and China. Each of these states appears to have a vested interest in what happens in Afghanistan. Only the pragmatic approach will enable the country to get away from interference of its neighbours.

Afghanistan needs peace and stability. Former King Zahir Shah seems to be the only hope to the people of Afghanistan who have suffered greatly for the last twenty two years. The country has been devastated and almost all the infrastructures have been destroyed. Under the Taliban the women had been the worst sufferers. In recent years earthquakes have hit the country exacerbating the misery of the people.

Former King Zahir Shah has been given a rare chance to set his country on a positive path. The international community waits on suspense whether the former King will be able to succeed in his challenging mission.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

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views.

There are two periods of Zahir Shah's rule -- one period extended from 1933 to 1963 and the other from 1963 to 1973. The first period is remembered as a period of peace while the second one appeared to be marked by elitism, nepotism and slow pace of modernisation. Furthermore the second period saw the power struggle between the King and his cousin Prime Minister Daoud Shah which led to his downfall in 1973. Daoud Shah abolished the monarchy in 1973 and became

the path of communism.

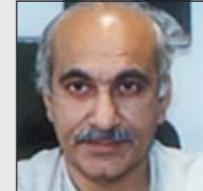
In April 1978 the communists took over and Daoud was killed in a coup which was known as "Saur Revolution" and a revolutionary Council was established. The communist rule with the support of Soviet Union continued until 1989 when the Soviet troops were finally withdrawn from Afghanistan. Then a vicious struggle continued among the Mujahedins until Taliban gained control in 1996.

Zahir Shah is expected to face tough challenges ahead of him. The

lands. The former King will have increasing difficulty in convincing Afghan people that they have been liberated if Afghan civilian deaths mount.

The second problem seems to be that the ethnic rivalries among the various tribes may pose a real threat to stability. The war lords continue to seek expanding their own power base. The Karzai government in Kabul is dominated by ethnic Tajiks. Their traditional rivals, the alienated Pashtun tribal leaders from the south do not approve of the

You are my Sonia



M.J. AKBAR

MOST political leaders consider themselves utterly fortunate if they can become indispensable to one political party. Sonia Gandhi has achieved the impossible. She has become indispensable to two political parties. The Congress as well as the BJP.

Fourteen Congress chief ministers gathered in Guwahati with the singular purpose of singing hosannas to their choice of heir to Atal Behari Vajpayee. On the other side of India, in Goa, Mr Vajpayee took up the challenge and opened the campaign for the next general election. Take my word for it. His gamble was protected by insurance. The BJP's insurance policy is called Sonia Gandhi.

The BJP has dared its allies in the National Democratic Alliance to break ranks and join a coalition with Sonia Gandhi. An alliance with the Congress would be easy for most of the partners of the ruling NDA. Old enmities have melted in the heat of new fires. Let Sonia Gandhi mention today that she is not interested in becoming Prime Minister and in less than a week there will be either a different BJP or an alternative coalition in power in Delhi. After Gujarat, even George Fernandes' Samata Party would split if Mr Fernandes remained loyal to the BJP in such circumstances. But the BJP knows that the prime ministership is a non-negotiable item on Sonia Gandhi's agenda. She would much prefer Atal Behari Vajpayee to remain Prime Minister if she cannot get the job herself. That was Sonia Gandhi's obstinate insistence in the old dark days of '272' (you have to lisp that to get it properly right). The confidence behind that itch has increased with fourteen states in the Congress fold. So the BJP can sit back and watch its partners in power squirming around a paradox: the stronger Sonia Gandhi feels, the weaker she actually gets.

Is this aversion to Sonia Gandhi personal? If it is, it is wrong. People in public life have to learn that they must keep their personal likes and dislikes outside the realm of decisions. A personal view must, or at least should, surrender to the larger need. Why should, therefore, potential allies of the Congress make Sonia Gandhi into an issue; why not leave it to the Congress to decide

Indian language; more categorically, she does not think in Indian. I am sure you understand precisely what I am saying. Her Hindi is a laboured joke; she has to read out speeches because Hindi does not come naturally to her. One dreads the thought of her becoming conversational in Hindi; mispronunciation can lead to very dangerous self-parody. What does she think she is going to do as Prime Minister? Speak to Indians in a kind of English that even the English would consider foreign? A Prime Minister has to communicate, constantly, with the people. Sonia Gandhi has no ability to do that. She and her party answer that by pointing out the famous fourteen, the 14 states where the Congress is in power. That is only a technical fact. In none of these states was Sonia Gandhi a candidate for chief minister. I doubt if the Sikh peasants of Punjab would have preferred her to Captain Amritinder Singh, or even Prakash Singh Badal. While we should not make more out of this than necessary, it remains pertinent that in her preferred province, Uttar Pradesh, Sonia Gandhi lost in her own constituency, Amethi during the last Assembly elections, in which the BJP got hammered.

The origins of Sonia Gandhi

would have been a problem for the Congress even in the usual circumstances of Indian politics, if the national debate had been over

issues of bread, butter and circus,

the three great themes of democracy. But the BJP, now fully led by its leader Mr Vajpayee, has switched the debate. The question today is

where the country stands over its

minority Muslim population. That is

the challenge thrown before every

political leader, every political party,

and every Indian. That is what the

next general election will be fought

becomes vengeful) is an open

question. The biggest challenge is

obviously before the Indian National

Congress because it claims to

believe in all three of the words that

make up its name. It must decide on

a critical point: is Sonia Gandhi an

asset or a liability for the party in this

debate? Can an Italian Christian

with extremely limited resources in

Hindi language and syntax, meet this

great challenge? Can Sonia Gandhi

campaign in Gujarat beyond making

set-piece speeches from thirty feet

above the crowd? The Gujarat

elections will be in June. Is Sonia

Gandhi the right person for the

Congress in this confrontation? This

is a moment, I believe, although I

can only depend on a hunch rather

than evidence, when even a

Jawaharlal Nehru might have

thought of stepping aside for a

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, if Patel

could carry the Congress argument

more convincingly. But in order to

think that you have to place the

country's interests above your

own.

Those who think the answer can

be written in black and white fool

themselves. The wisest of India's

political leaders Jawaharlal Nehru

appreciated the complexity only

after he had been defeated in his

passionate quest to preserve the

unity of India from the divisive

rhetoric of the Muslim League.

There are sleeping passions every-

where; which spark will light up

which corner of the mind and the

heart (the heart can be more dan-

gerous than the mind, when it

comes to the path of communism.

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Revolution" and a revolutionary

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