

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

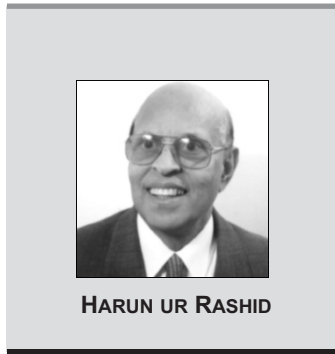
AS Sri Lanka makes a slow journey towards a possible peace the wings of diplomacy are also slowly flapping to soar. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Tyrrone Fernando has told Dhaka media that the cease fire signed with the belligerent LTTE is still in force and the final route to peace will be possibly negotiated 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.

Zahir Shah in Afghanistan: Challenging mission



IT would indeed be pusillanimous not to recognise the daunting tasks ahead of former King Zahir Shah who has arrived in Afghanistan after 34 years of exile in Rome. He has not returned to Afghanistan to claim his throne but to play a crucial political role in the country he had ruled for nearly forty years.

The interim leader of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai went to Rome to escort the former King. Although Zahir Shah is now 87 years old, he seems to be keen to play a constructive role as a 'symbol of unity' for all the people of Afghanistan at a time when unity is so imperative in Afghanistan.

Zahir Shah ruled the country from 1933 to 1973. He was ousted by his cousin Daoud Shah in 1973 while Zahir Shah was on a visit to Italy. Since then he remained there and led a quiet life. The terrorist attacks on September 11 brought

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 Hajara -- 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-

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 Pazwak 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-Queda '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-Queda 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, Tajikstan, 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.

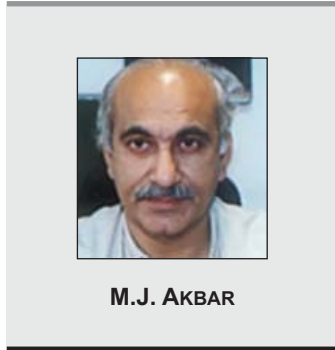
Former King Zahir Shah has been given a rare chance to set his country on a positive path. The international community waits on suspense whether the former King will be able to succeed in his challenging mission.

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

BOTTOM LINE

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... Zahir Shah has been given a rare chance to set his country on a positive path.

You are my Sonia



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 minister-ship 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 lipst 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

whom it wants as leader? Why should any other Congress leader, whether Manmohan Singh or Digvijay Singh or P.V. Narasimha Rao be acceptable as a future Prime Minister, but not Sonia Gandhi?

The answer is simple. Because she is not of Indian origin. She is an Italian. A passport, acquired fairly late in life, and much after it could have been done, does not make you an Indian. Her daughter Priyanka is an Indian, but not Sonia. Each time both speak they prove this. Sonia Gandhi does not know a single

on. 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 everywhere; which spark will light up which corner of the mind and the heart (the heart can be more dangerous than the mind, when it

India will be decided: in the minds of the Indian people, and particularly in the minds of Indians who are Hindus. The battle has to be at many levels. A Narasimha Rao could even form an alternative coalition in this Parliament, and turn the Lok Sabha into what it should be on occasion, the court of the people for the people. Sonia Gandhi's staccato phrases in an unfamiliar idiom will not serve. The Congress needs a leader who can think on his feet, not one whose thoughts have been written out for her in large type. No

BYLINE

The most damaging aspect of Hindu-Muslim relations in India is an untruth, but that does not make it less potent. This is the charge of appeasement. A growing number of Hindus, and you can include among them people who may never vote for the BJP, believe that Muslims can "get away" with anything while secular and democratic India provides no space for Hindu response or anger. The most important reason for this is that the face of Muslim opinion, in public life and media, is occupied by the most communal and sordid elements of the community.

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 Amrinder 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 his 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 like that you have to place the country's interests above your own.

The BJP is confident that Sonia Gandhi will never do that. That is the BJP's insurance policy. So far Sonia Gandhi has been taunting the BJP with the prospect of elections. After Goa, the BJP is taunting Sonia Gandhi with an election date, not just in Gujarat but also in the country. The BJP would have been much more reluctant to take on a Congress led by Narasimha Rao in such a debate. I have been Rao's worst critic since December 1992; I do not need a lesson in his inadequacies. But the situation is qualitatively different now. It is the Raos, Chandrashekhar, Deve Gowdas, V.P. Singhs, Manmohan Singhs, Chandra Babu Naidu, Karunanidhis and Arjun Singhs who have to claim the country from the BJP in the court of the Indian people. For that is where the future of

Congressman will tell her this, but the thought of Sonia Gandhi as Prime Minister interferes with an Indian's notions of self-respect.

Indian Muslims are today shattered by Mr Vajpayee's speech in Goa. Part of the reason is that they were comforted by that analogy of the mask. As Prime Minister Mr Vajpayee made that mask into a strategy and a policy, placing himself in between the Hindutva passions that flared up repeatedly in his own ranks; to use an analogy, he saw himself as the mortal Shiva who had to drink the poison to prevent it from spreading into the body politic. This was the man whose thoughts on a holiday in Kerala two years ago influenced the agenda of the nation, and dismayed the Hindutva brigade that wondered why it had made him Prime Minister. Something snapped somewhere. Perhaps it was the personal accusation that he had become a sponsor of Hindutva policies rather than a bulwark against them. Only he can say what happened, and what made him sweep every Muslim under the pockmarked fundamentalist carpet.

The real question before us is not what impact Vajpayee's speech has made upon Indian Muslims, but the impact it has made upon Indian Hindus. We have to understand the Vajpayee phenomenon coolly, without the traditional invective that so often passes for anti-establishment courage, and is therefore totally counter-productive.

An image has been created, perhaps consciously, that Vajpayee is the BJP's Nehru. This may have some truth to it, but it obscures the larger truth. Atal Behari Vajpayee is actually the BJP's Jinnah, not Nehru. I say this as a compliment, not a criticism. We have demonised Jinnah so much because of Partition, that we do not understand what

his career truly represented. But the point I am making lies a little askance. Why did Muslims respond, first in bits and pieces, and then overwhelmingly, to his call for Partition in the 1940s? It is when this same Jinnah, the man who had rejected everything that Muslim fundamentalists had fought for, who had stood alone and firm against the fire of the Khilafat struggle, who was in his personal habits and convictions totally secular, a man who could hardly do the namaaz -- when such a man finally decided that

Indian Muslims and Indian Hindus needed separate nations, then those who were undecided were swayed in his direction. If a Muslim as non-communal as him found it difficult to live in a united India then what hope was there for the others?

This is the most important element of the Vajpayee shift. Vajpayee has never been a fire-breather. He has never displayed the hatred for Muslims that is the motivation for so many of those on the fringe of his political canvas. He has always reached out to the Muslim community to the extent that he can. If a BJP leader like him can place Indian Muslims in a single basket, then you can imagine the impact it will have on those who are still making up their minds. That is the hidden power of the Vajpayee challenge, and no other BJP leader could have done what he has.

My country's Muslims can turn to anger; that will be understandable, but less productive than a second option. They might also want to try introspection. They must ask why a Vajpayee has reached where he has reached. It cannot all be the fault of the VHP and power politics and Gujarat, can it? Of course we all condemn Gujarat and Narendra Modi; but does some fault at least lie somewhere else?

The most damaging aspect of Hindu-Muslim relations in India is an untruth, but that does not make it less potent. This is the charge of appeasement. A growing number of Hindus, and you can include among them people who may never vote for the BJP, believe that Muslims can "get away" with anything while secular and democratic India provides no space for Hindu response or anger. The most important reason for this is that the face of Muslim opinion, in public life and media, is occupied by the most communal

and sordid elements of the community. I certainly do not want to categorise the ulema into a single negative phase, because they are not all evil. Equally, they are not the real representatives of the Muslims on secular and political matters. Each time you see a Muslim face on television at any moment of crisis, you see a one-foot beard as well. When Sonia Gandhi wants "Muslim" leaders she gives a ticket to a man who used to abuse her husband mercilessly through his beard, and spread communalism through his broad eyes. Even the thought of her assassinated husband did not prevent her from compromising with the Obaidullah Azmi. Some of the shaven faces in the so-called Muslim leadership are little better. Shahabuddin has been conducting a campaign of communal divide for nearly twenty years now, and the acid he smears on the ground still spreads anger among Hindus. Where is the Muslim leadership that has spoken of education and reform and economic progress? It is as if the only problems that Indian Muslims have is the fate of a Shia mosque at which no one prayed; or insistence on a discriminatory law against old widows.

Jawaharlal Nehru had an effective observation for this syndrome: majority communalism, he said, was far more dangerous than minority communalism because majority communalism could lead to fascism. Minority communalism could only be dangerous, he implied. But there are no Nehrus anymore, and communalism of both varieties has escalated to a level that Nehru and Patel could never have imagined. They lived through Partition, remember, so their imagination was not totally innocent; they had seen horrors their fathers could never have imagined. Each time it gets worse.

Jinnah never fully understood the consequences of what he was doing; and when he got his Pakistan he did not reject what he created, but he did wonder, publicly, whether it would work as he would have wanted it to. Jinnah wanted Pakistan to become a Muslim version of secular India.

I wonder if Atal Behari Vajpayee has fully understood the consequences of the challenge he has thrown before his country. He will lead his party in the summer elections for Gujarat, and probably the winter elections in the country. This may make him a Prime Minister for the fourth time. But there will still be a nation to mould afterwards.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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

attracting a lot of flak, our government again went about the Danish Aid withdrawal issue in its most callous way, just what was expected from our political guardians?

I just wonder if we are ever going to learn the educated way of handling of things. The banning of FEER and taking them to court immediately without giving any look into the allegations have only brought shame to the country in the international arena. Now we are again going to the length of challenging the Danish Government to prove their allegations. I hope our government don't go to the length of taking Danish Government to court on defamation charges. I just wonder why we can't just be a little more rational and learn to handle such issues in a civilised way. I don't believe just a FEER article can bring shame to our country if

we are really not what as being reflected in the article, the truth is bound to prevail and we must have come out clean if appropriate steps being taken. It is rather the government's unthoughtful reactions to these issues, which is bringing added shame and unforeseen consequences, which can be very grave, to our nation.

I don't wish to give any knowledge to our government which is pointless anyway but I just want to cite a couple of examples which can, I think, make our government and people give a rethink to their attitude. Malaysia has long been targeted by the US and the post September 11 period was definitely not smooth for Mahathir. Two major allegations were made against Malaysia during that period which I believe were graver than the FEER allegation. Firstly White House sought to take over-n-covert

actions in Malaysia (along with Indonesia), similar way in Afghanistan, alleging the presence of Al-Qaida cells inside their territory. What was Mahathir's response, a cool one: "We don't think we need America's assistance to fight terrorism; if they have any intelligence data we will definitely look into it." Second allegation was, when the CBI investigation found out a Malaysian national was closely involved in the September 11 attack, White House came out with this sensation-creating allegation that 'Malaysia was the launching-pad for the Sept-11 attack'. Mahathir's reply was again simple, "I don't think just one person's involvement makes Malaysia the launching-pad for the attack when all the terrorist got their training and everything inside the US". Of course Malaysia had arrested the terrorist even before America found

his link to the attack. Even after such wild allegations, I believe Malaysia's impression has only brightened to the world and even to White House after the Sept-11 tragedy and Mahathir getting frequent invitations and meetings with Mr Bush. I just wonder, if those kind of wild allegations were made against our country how our government would have reacted! I just don't understand why the judicious guardian of the country couldn't initiate an investigation and ask FEER as well as the Danish Government to assist in it instead of going for such wild and ferocious rejections of the allegations. After the investigation if we were found clean FEER and Danish Government must have withdrawn their allegations and we could prove it to the world. Now I think every door has been closed to show our cleanness with unknown

consequences to hang on over our shoulder. We need those money and aids and with such uncivilised and arrogant behaviour on display, who is going to come to show sympathy to our country? It's 21st and it's time we learnt some civility and rationality. Else we are doomed to be an isolated state like the Taliban's Afghanistan, Saddam's Iraq or Khomeini's Iran. Can we afford that?

Alamgir Hussain
Singapore

Mir Zafar the Uzbek, and we

In Bangladesh a betrayer to the country is labelled as a Mir Zafar, though this is a wrong connotation. Mir Zafar was not a son of this soil. He migrated from his native land, Uzbekistan, to Bengal in his youth with the hope of finding a fortune. So, no question of his betraying to

his own country does arise at all. He betrayed to his master, Nabob Sirajuddowla -- a non-Bengali ruler of Bengal.

If any Bangladeshi(s) was involved, we hope and pray none was, in getting the report, 'Beware of Bangladesh', published in FEER in any way, as being alleged by some quarters, then we must say, if it is true, that person(s) is worse than Mir Zafar. When the Transparency International reported Bangladesh as the number one corrupt country in the world, we saw some of us rejoiced over that report. This time also some people of us are rejoicing over the report of the FEER. These rejoicing people are worse than Mir Zafar. They are the true betrayers to their own country.

Faruque Hasan
Dhanmandi, Dhaka