

This is a national security issue

It should not be a pawn on the political chess-board

SOLELY aimed to hurt the interests of the state of Bangladesh, the serial bombing across the cinema halls in Mymensingh has been patently a diabolic act of subversion. With at least 17 dead, 200 injured and several decapitated, the sheer magnitude of the human tragedy on the day after Eid was shockingly illustrative of its mind-boggling heinousness. We are outraged as never before by the up-scaling terrorist mayhem in our country dreadfully approaching the notorious contemporary standards. We, therefore, condemn it with absolute derision and total revulsion.

At a time like this when we find ourselves catapulted on to a gray tangent of murky uncertainties, the matter is far too serious to be left to knee-jerk reactions. It goes beyond politics and political parties; for it was clearly intended, orchestrated and carried out to subvert the very interest of the state of Bangladesh and stability of its society. And what an orchestration this has been with a live bomb discovered at Gaibandha and one actually cracking at Kishoreganj alongside Mymensingh. The use of sophisticated devices has given rise to speculation as to whether this originated domestically or was an international handiwork.

We demand of our political parties, therefore, not to address the phenomenon with a partisan view but to deal with it as being subversive of the state and people of Bangladesh. We have had political flaws but never before has terrorism manifested with such venom as a challenge to our political culture. So, the political leadership across the board will have to squarely meet it collectively in greater national interest.

There has been a tendency typical of the current world scenario to brand and profile bombing incidents as acts of al-Qaeda, Taliban or other fundamentalist groups. Such premature stereotyping or resort to speculative conjectures may constrict the investigations along beaten tracks. The bottom-line for investigative purposes should be that it is not a domestic political question but a grave national security concern that's being addressed.

Regrettably, past investigations into explosions at public places have mostly proved inconclusive. Whenever fingers got pointed to any ruling party element or sympathiser during the course of investigation, the process would grind to a halt. Government as an institution -- past and present -- must be blamed for not carrying out investigations till their logical end.

Already, a blame-game has started whose proof we unfortunately discern in the arrest of some opposition leaders and activists hot on the heels of the serial bombing in Mymensingh (see the editorial below). Whereas we need all the national unity we can forge now, we only see the trading of blame instead. This seems set to prove counter-productive to the search for truth.

However, the Prime Minister has announced formation of an independent judicial inquiry committee promising a free and thorough probe into Saturday's dastardly incidents. While welcoming the move we hope the truth will be speedily unravelled and culprits brought to book.

Arrests that raise a lot of questions

The government-opposition relations dip further

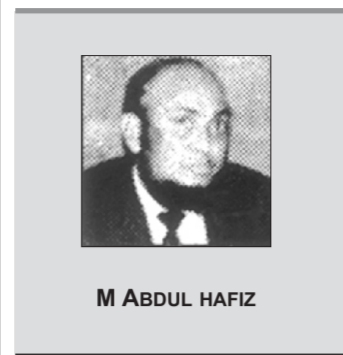
PRECISELY when all political forces need to join hands to address the serious question of subversion that we face today, the ever acrimonious relations between the ruling and the opposition parties take a further dip with the re-arrest of AL leader Sabir Hossain Chowdhury and arrest of some others. Also taken into custody were Shahriar Kabir (re-arrested), an author and human rights activist, and Muntasir Mamoon, a well-known historian and columnist. Of the total 11 persons arrested the above three were sent on a three-day police remand for questioning after being produced in court. So far there are no specific charges against any of them, and they are being held on suspicion of involvement in activities inimical to the interest of Bangladesh and of maligning Bangladesh's image abroad. Shahriar Kabir may also be implicated with aiding the two foreign journalists who are in Bangladesh jail now. In addition to the arrests raids were conducted on the same night on the houses of AL leaders and former ministers Amir Hossain Amu and Tofail Ahmed and columnist Abed Khan.

The Prime Minister during her visit to Mymensingh hinted about the implication of the opposition parties in the latest blasts without saying anything directly. That hint coupled with the arrests and raids of Sunday morning clearly indicate government's intention of connecting the opposition with, if not holding them responsible for, the latest events. This will no doubt further distance our political forces at a time when we desperately need their unity. The point we would like to stress is that while we do want all those responsible for or connected with the latest bomb explosions to be exposed to the public, arrested and finally punished regardless of their political affiliation and standing, we however do not want any witch hunting or political use of the incident.

Dr. Muntasir Mamoon and Abed Khan are well known columnists who are known for their opposition to this government. These two persons write what they feel and what they think. They are writers. They have never been known to be involved with any organisation, which is even remotely connected with any violent activities. They may have lent support to organisations or activities of political nature and their support have always been through their open writing and never in any hidden manner. Actions against them stand out distinctly from those against political activists, which again have to have their own justification.

We want to see some proof as to why these people have been arrested. Vague justifications are not acceptable especially against writers and columnists. We conclude by re-stressing the need for united political action against the saboteurs.

An ally or a client state ?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

NOtwithstanding a celebratory mood in Pakistan for being accepted as an ally of the United States in its war on terrorism a year ago the Pakistanis are now increasingly worried over what their country has been led up to as a result of doing bidding for the world's sole superpower. It did not take long for their euphoria to turn sour as more and more prices were extracted from Pakistan, an old American ally, just for the renewal of that status. The public anxiety in Pakistan was heightened by a series of weird incidents taking place in the endgame of US war on terror in Afghanistan, where Pakistan had to compromise bits of its sovereignty to oblige an over-demanding Washington. True, the country, by riding an anti-terrorist bandwagon, could avert the ire and onslaught of anti-terrorist warriors for its nexus with the Taliban next door, but at what cost? The self-respecting Pakistanis have, of late, started asking themselves this bitter question.

There was a fresh wave of indignation among them when in September last Dr Amir Aziz, a highly respectable orthopaedic surgeon on

the country was abducted and on American pointation bundled off to an unknown destination leaving the family and friends in dread and darkness. Best known for his services to the poor Amir Aziz was also providing medicare to the war shattered Afghans particularly those maimed by dreaded land mines. He apparently continued with his messianic mission even during the devastating US bombardment. There are reports suggesting that

an outrage in Pakistan.

But a legacy of servility and self-denial is the part of Pakistan's history whenever it came to the question of America. In Pakistan, a mysterious predilection for the US can be traced back to Liaqat Ali Khan, the country's first prime minister who chose to insult Josef Stalin by withdrawing his earlier acceptance of the latter's invitation to visit Moscow and instead traveled to meet Truman. A few years later

general election due to be held in early 1959 would destabilize Pakistan and unleash anti-American forces in the country and that it needed a period of dictatorship not only for its own good but also to serve US' interest better. Needless to say that after hearing two of Pakistan's highest dignitaries the US could not go along with their assessment of Pakistan's politics, needs and interest.

Z A Bhutto drew flakes from

opposition politicians have willy-nilly adopted the view that nothing of any consequence could happen in Pakistan without American approval. They believe it as a ground reality that American approval and support are essential for going forward in Pakistan. Also they seem ready and willing to accept this denial of dignity and self-imposed disgrace. It was thus not surprising that Ramzi Yousuf was bundled off to USA without raising a

Now, of course, these questions are irrelevant. In doing bidding for America Pakistan may have secured a temporary reprieve but the country is splattered with mini-garrisons of Americans whose troops move in and out of the country unhindered. When Abu Zubaida, an important aide of Bin Laden was apprehended in Faisalabad last summer it was a joint operation of Pakistan police and FBI agents but the latter took possession of the prey. FBI agents and US' Special Forces duly assisted by Pakistan military now comb Pakistan's hitherto forbidden tribal zone in the country's northwest, which was out of bounds even to Pakistani troops, to hunt down Taliban remnants. What is worse, it seems now that any citizen of Pakistan, can be picked up by FBI agents in collusion with Pakistan government and whisked off to any destination showing a thumb to the country's judicial system.

There can seldom be an alliance of any consequence between the unequals. What is however possible for them is to be partners of convenience in a patron-client relationship. As Pakistan frequently tampers with its democracy and as a result there is legitimacy crisis and the credibility gap of its government increases, the dependency syndrome also intensifies. In this process the "timely hand over of top al-Qaeda suspect Ramzi Bin Al Shihb in late September last was the latest down payment" of Pakistan "on an expedient deal that keeps 82nd Airborne at arms length and the soft loans coming."

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

PERSPECTIVES

There can seldom be an alliance of any consequence between the unequals. What is however possible for them is to be partners of convenience in a patron-client relationship. As Pakistan frequently tampers with its democracy and as a result there is legitimacy crisis and the credibility gap of its government increases, the dependency syndrome also intensifies.

he may have treated Mullah Umar and even possibly Osama Bin Laden during the crucial days of the war under an ethical impulse of a doctor. Was that his crime to abide by the professional ethics? Other reports speculate that he may have provided the al-Qaida boogeyman "bio-chemical weapon formula", specifically the anthrax. By no stretch of imagination a link can be found between an orthopaedic surgeon and the nasty business of bio-chemical weaponry. Even if there is one, Dr. Aziz could be brought before a court of justice in Pakistan instead of a bizarre hide and seek about the whole affair around him. On release of Amir Aziz after a month's mysterious disappearance it was learnt that he had been in the custody of intelligence agencies where he was questioned by CIA and FBI officials. This caused

pretending that its political stability and territorial integrity were threatened by the communists Pakistan received American military hardware free of cost for ten years till 1965 and hopped on to US-sponsored alliance in Middle East and Southeast Asia -- the regions to which it did not belong. During the height of cold war, America's U-2 spyflight for USSR took off from Badaber airbase near Peshawar. So subservient had the country been to the US without any respect gained in reciprocity from the other side!

Pakistan did nothing of any importance without US' permission. Prior to coup in 1958, President Iskander Mirza and General Ayub Khan, the then army chief, visited Washington to seek US blessing for their gameplan by convincing the US authorities that the country's

American establishment when he opposed US-endorsed Tashkent Declaration brokered by now defunct USSR in 1966 and devoted his book, *The Myth of Independence*, to the denunciation of Pakistan's subservience to US. But in 1971 when the generals in Rawalpindi asked Bhutto who was then pleading Pakistan's case in the UN to return home and take charge of the government, he first called the White House ostensibly to make amends and conciliate President Nixon. So mesmerizing was US' influence even on an anti-US radical like Bhutto.

It is only obvious that after nine/eleven this subservience has increased manifold amidst the country's political instability, lack of a legitimate representative government and economic adversity. Not only Pakistan's officialdom but also

finger by Benazir Bhutto to comply with the US' desire. The honour for the disposal of Mir Aimal Kansi in a still more crude manner went to Nawaz Sharif. Kansi was arrested with the abatement of Pakistan authority and delivered to FBI officials in violation of laws and constitution of the country, for his execution in the USA, of course, after a trial there the fairness of which is only known to the Americans, whereas it was Pakistan's sovereign right to prosecute Kansi and punish him, if in the opinion of a competent court there was sufficient evidence to justify conviction -- an extradition treaty notwithstanding. It is an irony that Pakistan voluntarily abdicated that right leaving people in doubts whether they have any constitutional guarantee for their protection or they are just at the mercy of foreign handlers.

Indo-Pak relations once again suffering setback

ZAGLUL A. CHOWDHURY

THERE seem to be signs of fresh tensions between India and Pakistan. The two nuclear-armed rivals, after a long spell of acrimonious postures when fears of a full-blown war also loomed large, returned to somewhat normalcy of relations not too long ago. India decided to withdraw its troops from the borders with Pakistan and Islamabad said it would follow suit. Two countries had mobilised nearly a million troops along their frontiers and decided to pull them back after a rather unusually long period. This came as a positive development even though the enmity and belligerence largely remained, which, however, is characteristic of their ties since both gained independence from the British in 1947.

Meanwhile, a new government has taken over in Pakistan with Zafarullah Khan Jamali as prime minister although military chief General Pervez Musharraf remains at the helm as powerful president. The prime minister has spoken of the intention of the new administration to maintain good ties with neighbouring India but made it clear that there would be no change in Pakistan's policy on "Kashmir" which is the main bone of contention between New Delhi and Islamabad. Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has congratulated his Pakistani counterpart but said he expects little initiative from the new government to improve the ties. In New Delhi's reckoning, Islamabad must stop "cross-border" terrorism and halt giving assistance to militants in India-administered Kashmir to normalise relations. In

Islamabad's view, India has to take a realistic assessment of the Kashmir situation and allow the people there the right of self-determination rather than blaming Pakistan for their struggle. Because of the divergent positions adopted by two sides on the Kashmir tangle, no common ground is available to improve the relationship and one continues to accuse the other for this situation. But what is particularly disturbing

"proxy" war in Kashmir by sending militants.

In last two years, India and Pakistan were on the verge of a war more than once but, happily, rolled back from that stance mainly due to international pressure. Even during the last SAARC summit in Kathmandu early this year, many felt that the outbreak of a conflict was only a matter of time. Because, mobilisation of troops along their

effectively came away from the war situation. It was a good development not only for the two countries but also for the South Asian region and the world as a whole. For, the devastations and havoc that a war between two nuclear rivals could bring are easily understandable.

Several factors had contributed to this situation, which, however, was no qualitative change of their acrimony. But the spectre of war

them is that the United States has mostly accomplished its political and military objectives in Afghanistan and as such it may not relish a war between India and Pakistan -- both of whom supported the American actions. A conflict between them would certainly disturb the present achievement in Afghanistan and may provide a scope for encouragement of terrorism since Indo-Pak war would automatically bring

fixed for the next summit as two sides keep on harping allegations against each other centring the Kashmir dispute.

Undoubtedly, the latest trend in relations between the two countries can be seen as a setback. It is because two sides although had stopped talking of war in recent months no noticeable steps were taken towards betterment of relationship. However, it is possible that these tough words from New Delhi and Islamabad are more for public consumption and placating certain quarters rather than meaning anything of serious proportion. Advani made most of his comments during electioneering in Gujarat state, which will elect a new assembly on December 12. The BJP needs to retain power in Gujarat despite the fact that its image has suffered badly due to the communal carnage from which the state is yet to recover. Its interim chief minister Narendra Modi is at the centre of controversy but the BJP is desperate to maintain its strong influence here and a bellicose hawkish approach towards Pakistan may help the BJP in the polls. Likewise, the new government in Pakistan cannot afford to be viewed as not tough so far the critical problem of Kashmir is concerned. As such, the war of words between the two countries at present seems more to do with domestic purposes to derive political mileage. Definitely, this is reversing whatever positive signs were there in recent times but may not be construed as anything very disturbing against the background of normalising efforts marked by pulling back troops from long borders of two countries.

MATTERS AROUND US

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at this stage is the sign that both nations seem to be returning to previous tough-talking which was absent for some time. India's deputy prime minister L. K. Advani has raked the old coals by talking of war postures despite the fact that it was only the other day that New Delhi spoke of withdrawing troops from the borders. Pakistan said it does not want war but would give a befitting answer if attacked by the hostile neighbour. Arguably, this may also not take things back to square one which is war-like situation. But certainly the good omens that were marked in the recent times appear to be giving way to signs of war postures. It is undesirable but reality is that once again both are talking of war. Advani said India would not hesitate to go for a "fourth war" if Islamabad continues to indulge in

long border and other form of war preparedness was so much in full swing that a war seemed almost inevitable. The SAARC summit -- the dramatic developments surrounding the talks or meetings of leaders of two countries -- definitely did cast a sobering effect on the two belligerent nations. Two rivals after the SAARC gathering, which brought Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan president General Pervez Musharraf not only on the same dais first time since the explosive situation persisted but also made them speak to each other, showed slackening in their war postures. Although locked in a bitter cycle of artillery exchange along the border in addition to intensifying the war of words to score diplomatic points, New Delhi and Islamabad slowly but

definitely subsided. The point that one may seek to drive home is that the condition like eruption of a war at any moment did evaporate to a large extent and both agreed to withdraw large mobilisation of army from the frontier. One may differ about the scale of diminution of tensions but there should be no difference on the view that many heaved a sigh of relief on the basis of a feeling that the nations were finally not going to an open and full conflict.

The visit of several foreign dignitaries to this region at a time of simmering tensions asking two contending sides to demonstrate restraint and visits by key figures from those countries who have considerable clout on New Delhi and Islamabad helped defuse the explosive situation. The foremost of

"Kashmir" to the fore and may encourage the remnants of the "Taliban" or hardcore Islamic militants in the region to be active on the scene.

However, a dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad seemed a remote possibility although different countries including the United States, UK and China have been calling for talks to resolve their differences. It is in this context that the summit between the leaders of two countries took place in "Agra" belying earlier scepticism that such an event was simply difficult. The summit was largely dubbed as a "failure" but it was essentially a leap forward since both sides had agreed to continue talks and a second Vajpayee-Musharraf meeting was decided in Pakistan. However, subsequently, no dates could yet be

A season of strikes

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

WITH Christmas only days away, the festive season in Britain is well under way. People belonging to all communities all over the country are busy making their preparations to take part in the celebrations. Shop windows are resplendent with glittering new wares of variegated hues, shapes and designs and every day hordes of enthusiastic buyers, undeterred by the cold weather and nagging showers, are descending upon shelves packed with clothes, foodstuffs and drinks, toys and the latest electronic gadgetry. But the last couple of months of 2002 have also turned out to be a season of mass strikes and ceasework by workers belonging to both the private and public sectors. This trend was initiated by the 48-hour strike called by the Fire Brigades Union between the 13th and 15th of November in demand for a substantial payrise for its members. That strike was marked by a number of unnecessary loss of life and avoidable damage to property and the Government's failure -- at least partly -- to tackle emergencies by deploying troops armed with outdated firefighting equipment and lacking adequate skills. The FBU warned that unless the Government came up with a reasonable offer of meeting its demand, it was prepared to follow up with a series of eight-day strikes until the authorities

relented. But the Government refused to agree to the terms laid down by the FBU, talks held between the firefighters' representatives and Government officials broke down at the negotiating table and the FBU's threatened eight-day ceasework was held from 9am on Friday, 22nd November to 9am on Saturday, 30th November.

This time, however, the troops were able to handle emergencies much more efficiently. Their experience during the previous occasion obviously taught them some useful lessons and they also had access to modern equipment and fire engines. The general public as well as businesses and commercial enterprises exercised greater restraint and caution in their day to day activities and this also helped keep fire-related incidents at a more or less controllable level. Meanwhile, the FBU's plans for further 8-day strikes on 4th and 16th December have been shelved unexpectedly. The union's executive committee has now decided to call off their second 8-day strike and agreed to return to the negotiating table once more. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service -- ACAS -- is going to act as a mediator between both sides in an attempt to reach a mutually acceptable solution, or at least a compromise. The union and the fire authority employers will now make separate submissions to ACAS in an effort to find common ground. FBU leader Andy Gilchrist

claims that the union's move was the result of the "constructive intervention" of ACAS, but at the same time stressed that the 8-day strike due to start on 16th December and run until Christmas Eve could still go ahead if no agreement was reached before that deadline.

Informed sources, however, believe that since the FBU has

put the pressure on to the employer and the Government."

Alongside the firefighters, members of the two largest classroom teaching unions in Britain -- the National Union of Teachers and the National Union of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers -- went on to strike on 26th November over their demands for a substantial

through strike." The Liberal Democrat education spokesperson, on the other hand, said: "The spiralling cost of living in London has been disastrous for all key public sector workers. Striking is not the way to resolve this issue but the Government has failed to take any strategic action to address the effect of London living costs for teachers."

pounded by the ongoing firefighters' strike, added to the distress and discomfiture of the general public. As I mentioned at the beginning, Christmas is only days away and although the season of strikes has not yet been able to badly dampen the people's festive spirit, there is certainly a growing uneasiness all around about what the weeks ahead

ble solution and to try to develop a suitable policy for tackling the issue. One of the main findings of the research, as highlighted in the report, is that the question of family honour is a very important issue to Asian Muslim parents and in order to preserve this honour they force their female offspring to marry cousins or other members of the family, frequently against their wishes.

Although marriage is sometimes used as a ploy to bring young Bangladeshi and Pakistani males to Britain and help them to gain legal status as immigrants, preservation of family honour is by far the most important motive, the report claims. Besides, as the report also mentions, many elderly guardians of young Asian Muslims think that marriage is the only way to prevent them from becoming spoilt or wayward. On the other hand, the youngsters -- especially those either born in Britain or have been brought up in this country from a very young age -- want to have the freedom to choose their own life partners. They do not have any reservations about marrying a Muslim, but they strongly object to being forced or dictated by their parents to marry a virtual stranger. There is also the question of compatibility. Girls born or brought up in the West and used to a degree of permissiveness can find it extremely difficult to adjust to a person coming from a much more conservative background. This lack

of compatibility is very often the cause of unhappy, broken marriages which, sadly, are on the increase among British Asians.

Publishing the result of the research, the Foreign Office Minister Baroness Amos said that the aim of the report was to increase social awareness among the various ethnic communities and to encourage them to develop true neighbourly attitude towards others. Referring to one of the findings of the research, she also said that it was regrettable that many Asian Muslim parents were against sending their children to universities for higher education because they were afraid that exposure to other communities and religions might lead them astray and lose respect for family honour. Making them marry according to the wishes of their parents was thus considered a way of preventing that possibility. But everyone had the right to have his or her own opinion regarding marriage, she added. The report concludes by suggesting that a suitable policy aimed at solving these and other related problems needed to be adopted and carefully put into practice in order to prevent any dispute involving racism and so-called Islamophobia. A large number of Asian Muslims, on the other hand, believe that the Government is trying to use this campaign against Forced Marriage as an excuse to introduce stricter immigration rules.

LONDON LETTER

invoked the ACAS process, it is now unlikely to carry out that threat. Government ministers, on the other hand, have greeted the call-off as a climbdown by a union that has realised that it cannot win. While Downing Street welcomed the union's decision to call off the 4th December strike, the Prime Minister's official spokesperson said that further strike action would be "foolish and foolhardy" and that "any move to resolve the dispute must be within the parameters set out by the Deputy Prime Minister" that any extra money for the firefighters must be funded by modernisation. Leaders of other major trade unions also expressed relief that the crisis has been averted, at least for the time being. As one of them remarked: "The ball is now surely in the Government's court", while another said that the FBU's move "shows sound strategic sense by its executive. It

rise in the capital's cost of living allowance. Nearly 10,000 teachers joined a one-day ceasework, the second industrial action by teachers this year over the allowance, thus affecting up to 5,000 primary and secondary schools in London and Greater London as well as elsewhere in the counties. Members of Unison, which represents school caretakers and other support staff, were also on strike at the same time, forcing schools to close for the day. Many headteachers who were in principle not in favour of the stoppage said that they could not take the risk of keeping their schools open because of the firefighters' dispute. Condemning the strike, the London Schools Minister said: "It is regrettable that the NUT and the NASUWT have decided to take strike action at this time.... A stoppage is not the answer The right way is through negotiation -- not

On the same day, and more or less over the same issue, employees of practically all the local authorities all over Britain -- represented mostly by Unison -- went on strike. This was actually the sixth time this year that the majority of local authority employees, except for very senior executives who are not members of any union because of their rank, staged a one-day ceasework, demanding an overall increase in London Weighting at par with inflation level. As a result, work at all local authority departments came to a virtual standstill for the day. Some officers belonging to managerial rank and above did not join the strike and reported for duty as usual, but hardly any work was done anywhere for obvious reasons. This naturally affected a number of essential services, not only in the public sector but in the private sector as well and, com-

may have in store. **Forced marriage and Britain's Muslim communities** The British foreign Office has recently published a report on the issue of Forced Marriage among the British Muslims in the country. It is the result of a research based on interviews of 120 Bangladeshis in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and another 120 Pakistanis in Bradford. The Foreign Office feels that Forced Marriage is a practice not really compatible with the British way of life and is an important factor that prevents ethnic communities to properly integrate with mainstream British society. It also creates many problems in establishing good relations with other, mainly non-Muslim, communities. So the research was conducted to find out the causes behind Forced Marriage as well as a possi-