

# Death of 11 youngsters

## Another wake-up call for safety precautions on the highway

**T**HURSDAY midnight's head-on collision between an auto-tempo and a minibus on the Chittagong-Rangamati highway, which left 11 people killed, most of them in their twenties, better not be set aside as just another tragic accident.

Fate runs its own course, some people may say. Others would wish the victims had not taken the trip, that, too, in an auto-tempo, in the first place. Such a resignation to fate might bring some solace to the friends and families of the hapless bunch of youth; however, it would also bury the crucial issue of road safety. We don't want to see their deaths go in vain. When people die at regular intervals in road mishaps across the country, there is more to it than just a stroke of misfortune. There has to be some systemic failures somewhere in the country's overall road safety management mechanism. The question is whether we have any such mechanism in place or not.

Road safety concerns by and large have remained confined to seminars and symposia rather than being addressed at the ground level. Some measures adopted in this regard over the years have more often than not been cosmetic, missing the target by miles. There are crucial issues that need to be tackled before we can think of streamlining the sector. For example, by the communications minister's own admission, half the number of drivers of different motorised vehicles do not have genuine licences. Some people tend to believe the figure could be still higher. It is also common knowledge that a substantial percentage of the vehicles is flawed and runs on fabricated fitness certificates. We have let our roads out to flawed vehicles and unlicensed drivers through the corruption of the concerned government authorities. This is just one aspect of the intricate road management matrix. There are more. Poor conditions of the roads, inadequate lighting on the highways, lack of highway patrol, non-enforcement of traffic rules and regulations, inoperative traffic signals ... the list can go on and on.

As our hearts reach out to the grieving families and friends of the hapless youths, who came out of their homes for a cricket match only to return as corpses, we ask the government to immediately pay attention to the overall road safety question. Fatalities in road accidents in Bangladesh rank among the highest in the world. The government cannot just blame it on fate.

# Move the building project elsewhere

## Preserve open spaces as environmental priority

**E**NVIRONMENTALISTS have again raised the point that construction of two residential buildings on the JS premises is an environmentally untenable proposition.

The speakers addressing a rally organised in the city by Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon said that the plan to construct two more buildings in the JS area was a clear and highly undesirable deviation from Louis I Kahn's master plan of the complex, believed to be an architectural work of great standing.

The environmentalists have also addressed some pertinent questions raised by the government decision to go ahead with the planned construction. We are told that there was no place for any residential quarters in Kahn's original plan, rather there was a provision for turning the open space into a playground. Of course, there is a big difference between the environmental impact of a residential building and a playground. It is a sad truth that those who approved the plan of constructing the two residential buildings for the Speaker and the deputy speaker failed miserably to realise that it amounted to tampering with the original plan.

People who are now opposing construction of the two buildings do not have a stake in the matter, except that they want the environmental needs of the city to get due attention. The decision-makers should ask themselves why the environmentalists are viewing the project with such reservations. The answer is not difficult to find. The city is left with very few open spaces, as the concrete monster is spreading its tentacles in every direction, looking for more and more areas to grab. But we might be putting our future at a grave risk by just helplessly watching what is going on. Some determined attempts must now be made to contain the monster.

Matters can only worsen when the government takes up a project, hostile to the environment. As the environmentalists are doing everything to make themselves understood, the decision-makers should be convinced that the buildings would only spoil the serenity of the site. They should not only abandon the project, but also come up with a set of clear policy directives in order to protect all the open spaces in the city in future.

### KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

**D**ECADES ago one young American President told his people and the world that the only thing they had to fear was fear itself. Later on a visit to then West Berlin, in defiance of the Cold War warriors he told his snow draped audience *Ich bin Berliner* (I am a Berliner). But before John Kennedy another American President Franklin Roosevelt echoing Francis Bacon and Henry David Thoreau, exhorted the American people, devastated by the depression of the Thirties, by asserting his firm belief " that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself -- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance". Adolf Hitler used fear as a weapon as did many other dictators from Nero to Idi Amin. None could, however, arrest the growth of civilization as men continued to conquer the fear of the unknown, the inexplicable, the complex and converting fear into courage ushered in the era of undreamt of prosperity. In this almost utopian environment like a viperous murderer a band of men bent upon inflicting the unspeakable terror on unsuspecting people have entered. The new millennium started with the horrific events warning the most powerful nation on earth of their acute vulnerability to devastation wrought upon them by these shadowy characters. Thus began the war on terrorism.

"Terrorism" as a word has become perhaps now most oft-quoted and most extensively researched and used term ever than any other coined in modern times. While lettered as well as unlettered are grappling to understand the different facets of the word; in Bangladesh we have coined another phrase "information terrorism" which is yet to find its way into the lexicon of other languages. What is "information terrorism", one may ask. In our context presumably it is construed to mean propaganda against "vital national interests" of Bangladesh at home and abroad by a group of people with "vested interests". This school of thought would ascribe not only lack of patriotism on the part of these people but would also like to accuse them of sedition. It may be of interest to note here that in 1798 the US Congress passed the Sedition Act which prohibited speeches and publica-

tions that contained "false, scandalous, and malicious writing" against the government. The Act generated intense debate one side arguing that the First Amendment protected most type of speeches while the other side argued for limitation on freedom to maintain political stability. The Act, however was unpopular and was allowed to expire in 1801.

In our present context the oppositional argument centers around the issue of separation of anti-government propaganda as opposed to anti-state activities and that the two should not be confused with one another. The party in power has accused the oppositional description of the government coalescing with fundamentalist elements to be responsible for this national calamity of our inclusion in the terror-risk list. The opposition political parties, on the other hand,

tion from lack of governmental action on the priest who publicly accused President Bush as a terrorist in an assembly of people who went to the mosque to offer their prayers. The incongruity of the remark and disproportionate punitive measures against him (the priest was a government official and thereby was bound by service regulations) was noted by many. The matter was further compounded by two religious edicts passed by an Islamic coalition partner of the government against two judges of the High Court describing them as enemies of Islam and condemning them to Roshdie-like death sentence because the judges had suo moto passed a judgment declaring religious edicts given by village priests as unlawful. In recent past we have witnessed expulsion of foreign

such actions, if taken, would be violative of freedom of speech and freedom of press guaranteed by the Bangladesh Constitution, the initial problem for the government would be to substantiate ascription of the term "terrorism" to criticism of the government. Acts of terror are generally taken to be of violent nature aimed at creating fear in a given population to effect political change on either a local or international scale. Even if one were to assume that oppositional politics influenced US decision to include Bangladesh in the terror-risk list (an extremely doubtful proposition); the alleged actions of the opposition were neither violent nor had given rise to violent actions affecting political stability. Doubtless political activity was to effect change in government but then that is expected of the opposition so long

when restrictions were placed on direct advocacy of treason, criticism of the government, conscription and the American Flag. But the First amendment to the US constitution specifically provided that "Congress shall make no laws.... abridging the freedom of speech or the press". Americans also refused to endorse any "taxes on knowledge"(a British equivalent of taxes imposed on printed matter). The core of all these legislations was protection of expressions critical of the government.

In Bangladesh constitution freedom of thought and conscience and of speech (article 39) is placed as a fundamental right. But restriction on it can be placed on grounds of public interest, public order or morality, security of state, maintenance of friendly relations with other states etc. Arbitrary invasion of

If Bangladesh is not to be regarded as a "failing" state as defined by the British Foreign Secretary (Jack Straw Failed and Failing State 6<sup>th</sup> September 2002) then we shall have no cause to worry. The government is certainly in control of the whole territory of Bangladesh thus denying the terrorists any possibility of training and launching human missiles on their path to destruction. But launching of Operation Clean Heart and subsequent promulgation of Indemnity Ordinance were admissions (if any were needed) that adoption of such extra-ordinary measures were necessary for protection of the citizens, Jack Straw's formula stresses the ability of the government to protect their own citizens. The second criteria regarding rule of law, promotion of human rights and provision of effective governance, like many developing countries, are yet to take full institutional shape in Bangladesh. Private counsel and public criticism of these elements by donor countries/agencies have been noticed far too often for our comfort. The third criteria of Jack Straw is the ability of the government to deliver public goods to its people( e.g. economic growth, education and health care). Bangladesh is assailed by rapid population growth, high unemployment and almost stagnant economy heavily dependent on agricultural sector.

Continuum of failure would not be placed at the door of any particular government or political party but should be shared by all including the people who either through active participation or acquiescence have not permitted the growth of the institutions seminal to socio-politico-economic development of the country. Dichotomous political streams extant in our polity notwithstanding, diplomatic and developmental engagements with the international community would serve our interests far better than wasting our time in coinage of new terms which can only be divisive at a time when unity among different sectors of the society is being called for.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is retired Secretary to the Bangladesh government and former ambassador.

**One is intrigued by the use of the term "information terrorism". Is it because that this eponymous characterisation has received such wide currency as any incorporeal idea does so that anything with a terrorist tag immediately attracts international attention regardless of the validity of such description? If the use of the term is to instill fear among the people about oppositional politics regardless of emblematic nature then such stratagem is not only disingenuous but also grotesque.**

has held inept governance and failed foreign policy as the primary reasons for this catastrophe. What has surprised many is that the government did not see it coming. After all Bertil Lintner's article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* on the rise of Islamic fundamentalism appeared in April last year followed by similar stories in the *Time* magazine and *Asian Wall Street Journal* alleging sanctuary being given to transnational Islamist elements including some members of Al-Qaeda (stoutly denied by the government). Some Indian agencies reporting on the recent congregation of Muslims in Bangladesh from about fifty countries, the second largest assembly of Muslims after the Hajj in the world, has drawn the conclusion that this congregation reflects the "the role the country has come to play in the context of Islamic brotherhood". This conclusion appears to be fallacious as this particular assembly of Muslims from far and wide is not a recent phenomenon but has been an annual event for many years.

Bangladesh's image as a non-moderate Islamic country in the eyes of her detractors got ammun-

journalists from Bangladesh accused of having entered the country under pretense and with a hidden agenda to further portray Bangladesh of Islamic fundamentalism and continued persecution of their local collaborators to the chagrin of national and international journalists' associations.

One would have expected Bangladesh government to take anticipatory actions as soon as or before the first terror-risk list of countries was made public. It is difficult to predict, notwithstanding the assurances given by the US ambassador in Bangladesh that our politico-economic interests would not be affected by this move, how much corrective results of the current diplomatic activities being undertaken would be able to reverse the American decision. Developed countries do not generally take impulsive decisions and are reluctant to undo even decisions taken on fallacious grounds as the case of Bangladesh eminently proves. If satisfactory results are not achieved then it may be within the realms of possibility of witch hunting by governmental agencies for "information terrorists". Apart from the fact that

changes, if any, are done within the bounds of law. If violence is perpetrated by governmental agencies against opposition resulting in a people's movement similar to the one we had witnessed during the anti-autocracy struggle; then such a situation cannot be dubbed as terrorism-inspired.

We may now examine whether the alleged oppositional politics at home and abroad exceeded the limits of oppositional politics and entered the realm of anti-state activities. Freedom of speech and expression, both oral and written, are generally put beyond violative intrusions by the executive and considered as inalienable rights. Limitation on such freedom can, however, be imposed if charged with libel, slander, obscenity, sedition, bribery, perjury, incitement to riots etc. It is recognized that unrestricted freedom of expression can lead to infringement of the rights of others, particularly in times of war when these rights are abridged in the interest of public security. Americans had used such abridgement in circumstances of "clear and present danger", for example during the First World War

fundamental rights which does not contain the quality of reasonableness is not sustainable and can be termed as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court should it so desire. Thus freedom of thought and conscience and of speech has not been completely put at the mercy of the legislature in order to strike a balance between individual right and collective right.

One is intrigued by the use of the term "information terrorism". Is it because that this eponymous characterisation has received such wide currency as any incorporeal idea does so that anything with a terrorist tag immediately attracts international attention regardless of the validity of such description? If the use of the term is to instill fear among the people about oppositional politics regardless of emblematic nature then such stratagem is not only disingenuous but also grotesque. Divergent political opinion nourishes democracy. Political challenges should be met with better political ideas and not with threat of detention and consequent trauma inflicted on the detainees both physical and mental at the hands of their inquisitors.

# When we honour others, we honour ourselves

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED  
*writes from Princeton*

**I**N several countries of the world, the New Year is ushered in with fanfare, as well as with a list of people the nation feels ought to be honoured. At the onset of the Gregorian or Bengali New Year, Bangladesh should be doing the same. It appears to me that we have not adequately honoured, with the nation's highest civilian awards, individuals who have helped Bangladesh in the past and are helping it at present. Here are some suggestions.

For someone with stellar recent contributions to Bangladesh, we need to look no farther than the current United States Ambassador to Bangladesh, Her Excellency Mary Ann Peters. I do not recall any other Ambassador who has been a better friend of Bangladesh. She has chastised her nation's media for Bangladesh-bashing. At times she has been at odds with her own nation's government over its policy towards Bangladesh. Although it was beyond her power to prevent Bangladesh from being included on the State Department's list of "terror-risk nations," it is clear where her heart is. I do not know whether the government of my native land will honour her, but I, and many expatriate Bangladeshis I have spoken to, will remain eternally grateful to Her Excellency Mary Ann Peters for all that she has done for Bangladesh.

Now let us go back to the beginning of Bangladesh. For his contribution to the liberation war and for helping print Bangladesh's first postal stamp, the father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman,

had bestowed on British Member of the Parliament, Mr. John Stonehouse, an honorary Bangladesh citizenship in the early 1970s. Unfortunately for Bangladesh, Mr. Stonehouse fell on hard (criminal) times, faked his drowning in Miami, USA, and was arrested hale and hearty in Australia! Still, I believe that it was the correct deci-

sion to honour Mr. Stonehouse, a friend in need. For the same reason, Nelson Mandela still expresses his gratitude to Fidel Castro for Castro's support of the black South Africans during the apartheid era, and Mandela remains furious with Israel for Israel's wholehearted cooperation with racist South Africa to the detriment of black South Africans.

Perhaps because of their impending diplomatic overtures to China (Pakistan's friend), President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor/Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger had remained adamantly opposed to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The American public (Europeans too) first became aware of the name "Bangladesh" because of a concert held

in New York City's Madison Square Garden, appropriately named, "Concert for Bangladesh," in 1971. Although the late Beate, George Harrison, got most of the credit for the concert, for he sang the theme song, "Bangladesh, Bangladesh," the main force behind the concert was maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar, the Beatles' Indian Guru. Sitar mae-

stro Ravi Shanker's glittering list of accomplishments also include Music Directorship of Satyajit Ray's earlier films, as well as that of Richard Attenborough's 1982 epic, "Gandhi." Now, Ravi Shanker did not organise the concert for Bangladesh because he felt that the creation of Bangladesh would weaken Pakistan and strengthen India; he did it purely for the love of his East Bengali brothers and sisters.

Pandit Ravi Shanker also recorded a heart-searing Bengali song, "Hae Bhagaban, Khuda Taala" (O Hindu God, Muslim God), lamenting God's punishment of the Bangladeshis. We had failed to honour George Harrison during his lifetime, for he left us in 2001. We must honour him now, even after his death. Surely, we

must do something big to honour Pandit Ravi Shanker, another of our true friend in need.

It is great that we have adopted Rabindranath Tagore's "Shonar Bangla" as our national anthem. But we must do more. Bangladesh is the only nation on earth with Bangla as its national language. Our national language, Bangla,

one were to select ten all time best Bengali songs, Lataji would have at least seven. Can anyone in Bangladesh, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition included, deny humming a Lata Bengali or Hindi song even to this day? During the writer's recent visit to Bangladesh, he stocked up on Lata's Hindi and Bengali CDs. Lataji would top

after the friendly people of Turkey.

The writer is not opposed to retaining British era names per se. After all, the writer is suggesting that we honour another Englishman, George Harrison, by naming something after him. How the British era gentlemen gained their prominence is what we have to investigate. If Mr. Cox was rewarded for suppressing freedom fighter Master Da Surja Sen in Chittagong, for example, (I am not suggesting he did) we have to reevaluate whether he deserves the honour. On the other hand, there are Brit-ishers who have helped East Bengalees enormously, and we must keep on honouring them by retaining their names. Lord Curzon, after whom Curzon Hall, Dhaka University's sprawling Science Complex is named (of which the writer is a beneficiary), is one such person. It was Lord Curzon's determination to help the East Bengalees that resulted in the creation of Dhaka University in 1922.

National awards are meant to be given away to deserving persons. Hoarding and hogging them defeats the purpose for which they were created. We cannot repay our enormous debts to those who came through for us at a time when there was little hope for our nationhood. All we can do now is acknowledge our debts to them, and to others who have enriched us culturally, by awarding them some titles, and naming roads and institutions after them, as tokens of our national appreciation. After all, as a nation, when we honour others, we honour ourselves.

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Push in by BSF

Throughout the last few weeks, we have been reading the grave situation of abuse by our neighbouring nation's own citizens into Bangladesh. There have been claims by India that these people are Bangladeshi and in turn, we are finding them to be Bangla speaking, Indian nationals gathered from all over India. While this tug of war is continuing, where push in attempts have become a daily ritual by the BSF and a cat-and-mouse game between the border guards. It amazes me that Bangladesh Foreign Ministry and our regular national dailies have not taken any step to gather information from these people and present the secular views of the Indian government to the world. These people have become refugees in their own country and this issue needs to be addressed by our government. The world should have the opportunity to see the injustice of the current Indian government to its own people and minority. To this day, our Foreign Ministry has not gathered a

diplomatic team of international countries and UN members to these sites and meet these people!

Perhaps it could become a hot political subject by the current BJP politburo as a platform for its re-election campaign. If our diplomats were a little bit far sighted, they would look into political strategies around the world where the subject of threats against a nation have always become a good re-election policy. Throughout the history of democracy, this example could be cited from numerous nations. Thus I would like to ask the Foreign Ministry and our political parties if they honestly believe that this problem will subside on its own.

Riyadh Hossain, Austin, USA

I want to thank Mr. Masud Karim for his letter "Push-in and HR violation". Not only the human rights activists, but also the news agencies have some allergy regarding the issue. But when it comes to presence of al-Qaeda network in Bangladesh etc they seem to be very much interested, though there is no concrete

evidence behind those.

May be the ill-fated people gathered for push-in are too inferior to be regarded as "human" by these human rights activists and the members of the "civil" society.

Joy, Dhaka

### INS requirements and diplomatic reciprocity

Many Bangladeshis are writing letters to The Daily Star complaining about Bangladesh's inclusion on the INS list and how Bangladesh should call for "diplomatic reciprocity." If any of these Bangladeshis had done any research on the experiences of the Westerners have in entering Bangladesh, I doubt that they would be complaining about requirements for Bangladeshis entering the US.

Most of all they would not be asking for diplomatic reciprocity, unless they want to be stared at, cheated with all sorts of strange fees, harassed for "bakshish" by the customs "officers," and discriminated against because of skin

colour. Have any of these letter writers (who have complained about the INS requirements) ever consulted an American on the difficulties he/she has faced upon entering this country? And have we forgotten September 11 already? If September 11 had occurred in our backyard, wouldn't we want to prevent it from happening again in some other shape or form? The US has a right to track visitors coming into its borders; that is the only purpose of the INS requirements and the US has told you this over and over.

Ali, Dhaka

### Welcome, human clone

Controversies, whether human cloning will be good for the mankind or not, have been going on for years. But things are quite different now. The cloning controversy has moved a step forward -- a human clone has come into being at last. It is a turning point for the civilisation, yet the scientists are not so sure about its future.

Throughout the history of civilisation every major turn raised ideological debates in its earlier stage. The case is identical regarding human cloning as well. Some people regard human cloning as an inhuman attempt. They show many reasons to justify this standpoint. A human child is brought up by its parents whose sincerity is unquestionable. And it's not only human beings, but other animal raise their babies with great care too. Then again, everyone knows how difficult it is to rear an orphan child. So, will not the human-cloned child be deprived of motherly affection and fatherly care? Will not life be a burden on the very being? Why should we impose such load upon him? These questions interrupted the development of human cloning but could not stop the endeavour. At last man's thirst to experience the unknown and unseen win over all difficulties.

We must act with an open mind and welcome the new venture. Being frightened and suspicious of cloning would not help. So we thank the bravery of the scientists and welcome the first cloned human being to earth.

### Sonad Singha, Gaibandha

### 3 D game in Bangladesh

A few days ago I went to the BCS Computer Show and met a group of young programmers who developed the 'First 3D game in Bangladesh' called 'Dhaka Racing' and marketed it completely with their own financial support. They have developed this game on the roads of Dhaka and I found very enthusiastic crowd gathered around in their Stall No. 18. I also went to their website (www.dhakaracing.com) and learnt about their progress.

I must confess that I am not a serious gamer, however, I congratulate these programmers for their initiatives to develop and market a game in Bangladesh. Remember that they run the risk of piracy of the game.

We must highlight their initiative and encourage these youngsters. Shaikh M Habib, Shamoly, Dhaka  
**Is war inevitable?**

Mixed messages from the Bush administration notwithstanding, war seems inevitable. Why else this unremitting preparations, this massive build up of forces and armour, this barely concealed indifference to counsels of wisdom and public protests urging peaceful means? Why disarming Iraq has become the single most pressing agenda for the US while Palestine burns?

We have heard eloquent rhetoric by Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair; how they are out to make the world a safer place, how they wish to guard freedom, democracy and human rights. Do we need to destroy Iraq or is Iraq such a singular threat? These two champions are bent upon pre-emption. Yet their logic of war fails to convince. From a clinical point of view, their prescription is radical surgery on mere presumption without evidence of cancer. And what these two champions do when they have evidence? They pronounce negotiation, appeasement, or at best take recourse to the Security Council to debate what is unilateral agenda laced with threat

they are afraid to follow through. This is clear in the case of North Korea which managed to give these two a dose of their own medicine by demanding a written non-aggression treaty before they sit down to negotiate not in the Security Council but with the US which they rightly recognise as the only party to the dispute. You can get away with these bullies if you are equally dangerous as they are. And who is seeking to make the Korean divide permanent but hastily applauded the reunification of Germany?

All this sounds hollow in spite of the rhetoric in speech after speech. The Millennium Goal asked for mere 10 billion dollars and what the US managed to pledge is merely 200 million dollars to fund modest goals of reducing poverty, AIDS and Malaria. That is a fraction of the cost of a single stealth bomber that it is willing and able to deploy by the dozens to rain destruction and death.

Hussain, Dhaka