

How long Russia will wage a 'colonial war' in Chechnya?

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CHECHNYA, a predominantly Muslim territory, which was never a part of Russia proper, until it was conquered and annexed by the Tsar in 1859, has again started to show its teeth and claws to Russian occupation forces. The Chechen freedom fighters, dubbed as "Islamic terrorists," (nowadays an easy way of winning the West's support), are at it, under the leadership of Shamil Basayer, better known to the west as a separatist war-lord. He carries a price-tag on his head, of one million US dollar, fixed in 1999 by Vladimir Putin, President of Russia. Reportedly the country can't even pay its army their monthly salaries because of its almost bankrupt economy, since the disintegration of former Soviet Union, and is surviving mostly on economic 'crutch', provided by the West, particularly America.

The latest 'episode' of so-called Chechen 'terrorists' happened when two women suicide bombers blew a Moscow concert killing at least 20 on July 5. Earlier, a woman suicide bomber, ambushed a bus carrying Russian Air Force pilots and some servicemen in Russia's north Ossetia region, which is considered as the springboard for Russian military operation in Chechnya, killing herself and seventeen air men and wounding

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twelve others last month. The attack was the third one in three weeks, the earlier two taking place in May.

It may be mentioned here that the most shocking suicide attack in Russia came on the eve of Russian parliament (Duma) vote on a 'partial' amnesty for the Chechen 'rebels' aimed at improving prospects of a Russian peace plan for Chechnya. But the so-called 'amnesty' programme was rejected by the Chechen rebel leader Shamil who had already taken to the field against Russian occupation forces. The freedom fighters have now become more active in the field. Shamil, who had earlier claimed responsibility for the two attacks in May with an open threat of launching a "whirlpool of violence," has already proved himself "notorious" to the Russian government.

Moscow holds him "responsible" for being the mastermind behind a series of explosions in some apartment blocks in Moscow and other parts of Russia sometime back.

A nightmare

In fact, the war against Chechens was formally launched by then President Boris Yeltsin in 1999, after a continuous air and missile attacks on Chechnya, the special target being its capital Grozny, since September 5 the same year. This sudden upsurge against Chechnya by Russian forces came after a lull of about three years following the 1994-96 war when the Russian forces were badly mauled and sent home lock, stock and barrel. Neither Yeltsin nor the Army Generals could swallow this humiliation. So in order to regain their 'lost image', they were in full

General Vladimir Ustinov, in a televised interview, had declared: "we will locate their training centres and trace their funding sources."

From 'stick' to 'carrot'

President Putin, a former KGB man and later chief of successor agency FSB (Russian Internal Security Service) who had a clean sweep in 1999 Presidential election, seems to have changed his strategy for the up-coming presidential election in 2004 from proverbial 'stick' policy to 'carrot' policy. Of course, he did use the 'stick', minus the 'carrot', against the Chechen rebels in 1999 to warm up his popularity rating which was only two per cent when he was put in the political arena of Russia by his mentors and well-wishers. But with the passage of time, Putin had learnt a lot of sweet and bitter lessons that had now prompted him to change his 'mucho' style, offering the rebels an olive branch which had already been munched by the Chechen fighters. What is the way out now for Putin? Going back to the war field, or hold a peace dialogue with Chechen leaders?

Costly war

The time has now come for Putin and his western friends to realise that Russia cannot continue its 'colonial war' against the Chechen freedom-fighters *ad infinitum* with its sinking rubles. They will have to accept this hard truth as it would be a sheer wastage of borrowed money to spend it recklessly on the hopeless war. They should learn to call a spade, a spade. They should have been alerted much earlier when former US Secretary of State Dr. Kissinger warned them saying that Russia was "waging a colonial war" in Chechnya, and also pointed out that Chechnya "was not a part of Russia proper" but "an area conquered by Tsarist Russia." Even one of Russia's 'dissident' governors Nikolai Fyodorov, criticising Putin's Chechnya policy, once said: "The war in Chechnya is hopeless with no end in sight. ... It is also criminal because it is partly a civil war." But the warnings coming from home and abroad fell on deaf ears of both Yeltsin, till he was in power, and his able successor Putin.

Too late

As they say, "scratch a Russian and you find a Tartar." Now Putin had realised that he stands face to face with a real Tartar, after perhaps too much 'scratching' of the two Chechen leaders, the Chief Commander Shamil Basayer and Chechen President Aslam Maskhdov. So he has now calmed down for peace in Chechnya. But it is too late now. He is already up to his neck in the hot soup of his own making. It is a hard task to get out of this mess, saving his 'face' before his home crowd. Perhaps the only option to win his second-term presidential election is to indulge in an adventure or misadventure, by driving on reverse-gear to 1999 scenario of ruthless army and air action to crush the Chechen 'terrorists'. But will that succeed this time?

However, the genuine peace in Chechnya ultimately lies on the correct perception of ground reality and taking correct steps for the solution of the problem through dialogue with the Chechen leaders, not dismissing them as "Islamic terrorists". If necessary, there should be a third-party involvement, preferably of the US-EU leaders, to keep the talks on the right track.

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In memoriam

Ishtiaq, as I knew him

M. AZIZUL JALIL

I was fortunate in having many good friends from school and college/university days but Ishtiaq Ahmad was my best friend. He was like a brother to me -- warm, sincere, caring and eager to help in any way. He always called my parents 'Abba and Amma' and my brother as 'Bhaiya'. He was a household name to our entire family including my uncles who were his 'mamas' as well. Whatever his other engagements were, he would make time to attend a function or invitation in our house. Whenever he visited Washington, he would choose to stay with me though many other friends would extend invitation to their house. He told them that 'as long as Jalil is in Washington DC area, thanks but I cannot stay with anyone else'. About a decade ago in presenting him a book, I wrote on it 'have given you so little but received so much more-- my friend, I have become forever grateful to you'.

I first met him in 1948 at age fifteen in the Dhaka College where we finished our Intermediate degrees, before we both joined the Economics Department in the Dhaka University. He was tall, thin, and very fair with thick curly black hair, mostly wearing a cream coloured sherwani and was very active and spirited. Even in those days, he was a great orator in both Bengali and English. He took active part in debates and most student and political activities and even joined the fast for a few days when we went on strike for better facilities for the Dhaka College in 1949. In the University days, despite differing in our socio-political views, we maintained close personal friendship. In 1955, he wanted to go to UK for legal studies and I was already there. He wrote to me to send necessary forms and documents to him which I did. I remember meeting him almost on a daily basis in our London days. I remember meeting and talking one long evening with Sheikh Mujib (as he was known then) in 1956 and having rice and curry sitting on the carpet of Ishtiaq's bed-sitting room. When I was in Lahore in 1958 at the Civil Service Academy, Ishtiaq requested that I send him the Tax Reform Commission report, which I did. In the fall of 1959 when my wife and I went to London on way to Oxford, it was Ishtiaq and his wife Sufia who made our hotel arrangements and received us at the Terminal. Whenever we came to visit London from Oxford, we would invariably be entertained by Ishtiaq and his wife and spend a lot of time together. We went together to see the play 'My Fair Lady' in Leicester Square. His son Refaat was born about that time.

From 1960 till 1967 when I left Dhaka for assignment in Rawalpindi and during my visits to Dhaka up to 1970, we met regularly if not daily at his house (or at the Dhaka Club). He was a busy barrister but after his work for the day was finished around 9 pm, we would sit in the veranda of his Dhanmondi house for 'adda' and dinner late in the night. He loved to be amongst friends and was himself a very good company -- witty, amiable and such a generous host. A stream of common friends would drop by every evening and join our discussion of important and not-so-important issues. That was his life style and he told me he felt very relaxed in the company of good friends after a hard day's legal work. He would take me sometimes to the High Court and I would sit in his chamber while he was briefed by juniors, or go to hear his arguments in court. He visited me with his daughter Raina in Pindi in 1969. Obaidullah Khan, who was then in Pindi and I took them for trips to Taxila and Abbottabad.

In late 1970 when I left for Brussels via Dhaka, it was Ishtiaq and Sufia who saw us off at Tejgaon Airport. We remained in touch and met again accidentally in Bangkok while I was on my way to Dhaka on home leave from the World Bank in 1973. From then on, during our regular visits to Dhaka, Ishtiaq and his family were our best attraction. We would spend maximum time together, mostly telling old student-life jokes (including our so-called educational trip to Barisal by Rocket, and other exploits), exchanging information about each other and common friends, and discussing national affairs. He had a child's curiosity in everything and would often turn an insignificant and chance remark of mine into something big and significant. I never heard him swear or make any malicious statement about another person. If he became upset about a person or incident, he would only make a soft and sad remark and with a sigh, keep quiet.

He first visited me in Washington in 1976 after his attendance at a UN conference on Water Rights in New York. On that occasion he was present at a large house warming party at my house. He enjoyed it and was very happy to meet and talk to diverse people --

some he knew and others not known to him at all. He also eagerly watched the presidential election debate between President Ford and (later President) Jimmy Carter on TV and would not allow me to serve dinner until it was finished. After my return from assignment in Zambia, he came again in 1981. It was during this visit that he along with my eleven year-old son Aftab planted a small Japanese Maple tree in my front yard. We were digging with a small hand cultivator but on his sugges-



tion, he and I went out and bought a larger/heavier shovel. He was in his dress shoes and the large and heavy man that he was then, he nearly slipped while helping me to dig. As he said at the time, God saved him and there was no serious injury. That plant after about twenty years has grown into a large and beautiful tree, brown in colour in the spring and summer. Hearing about his Ishtiaq uncle's death, Aftab immediately suggested that we put up a plaque, with his name near the tree in his memory. Ishtiaq later visited me a couple of times and became very affectionate to my children, especially to my youngest son.

His last visit for a fortnight's holiday with us in Washington was in August 2000. He would wake up early, we would take tea together and then he would insist that, without delay, I read to him the Dhaka newspapers on the Internet. I took him to Boston for a medical checkup for his diabetic problems. His health was already deteriorating and he would get tired and disinterested after a while. I took him on a boat ride on the Potomac and by car to the nearby Sugarloaf Mountain and Mount Vernon areas but he was absent minded. At that time and by telephone and e-mails later, I pleaded with him to change his life style and reduce workload and long hours. Still he carried on at the same pace and accepted the offer of membership in the caretaker government in 2001. The experience of that government and its aftermath took a very heavy toll, physically and mentally, on his already weak health. Despite that, during our December 2001 visit, at my request he arranged for our two families to visit the Jamuna Bridge and the ultra-modern Square Pharmaceutical factory on the way. He jokingly inquired whether the arrangements were to my satisfac-

tion. In fact during earlier visits, he and I went with families to Cox's Bazar and the Brac Centre near Joydevpur -- he took great delight in being able to do these things for us. During the same visit, he and Sufia were quite keen to go with us on a visit to Kualalumpur. But unfortunately, it did not happen as I had to come back to the States earlier than scheduled. I will regret it forever as that was the last such opportunity.

In late 2002, he went into a coma and was taken to Bangkok. I later called him on his hospital bed and he then promised me that he would take better care of himself and try to live a healthier life. It was perhaps too late and he never really fully recovered. I decided to visit Dhaka in January this year primarily to see him since he had gone again into a coma soon after returning from Bangkok. We spent at least a few hours with him each day of our stay, sitting in his verandah amidst plants and flowers that he loved so much. He was still lucid most of the time but life was running out of him. His hospitality, however, continued at a high level and he would insist on our having lunch or dinner with him at least once a day. He would even call and arrange a dinner for common friends at another friend's (Dr. Manzure Khuda) house for us all to meet.

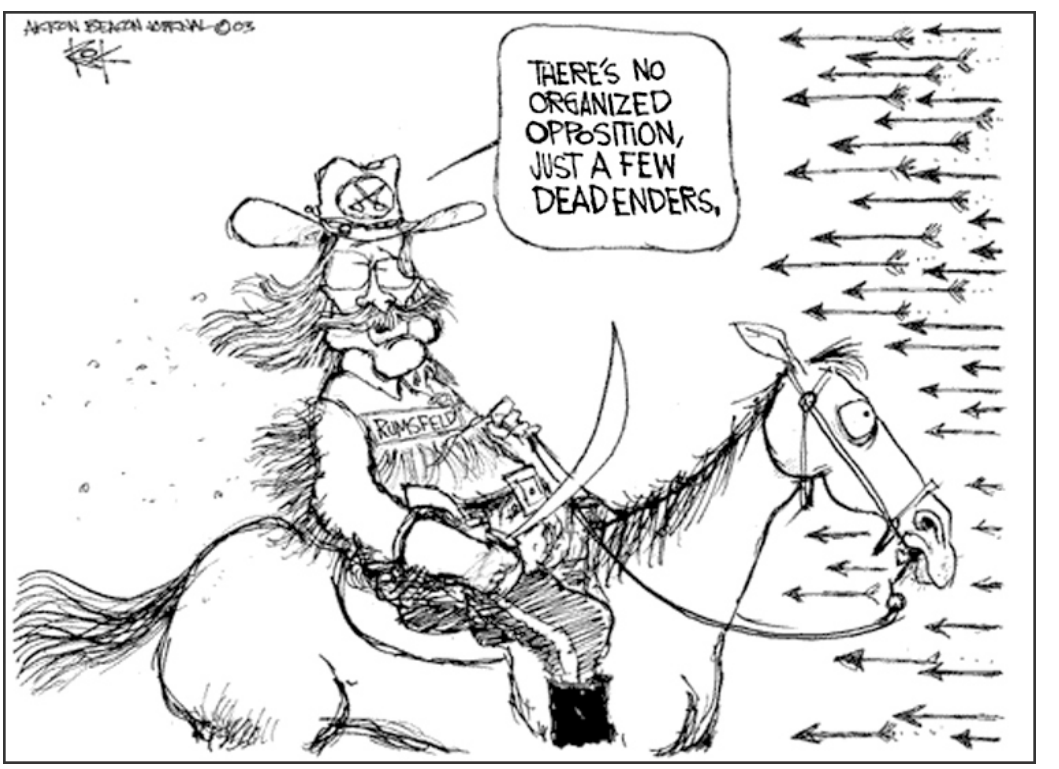
On the day after the Bakr-Eid, at 9 am in the morning I got the news at my third floor apartment in Dhanmondi that Ishtiaq had come to see me and was sitting in his car for me to come down. He had first gone to my brother's house in Eskaton since he forgot where I was staying. He stayed for about an hour in the downstairs living room of my sister-in-law. At that moment, he was full of grace and charm and even suggested that my wife and her sisters remodel their old parental home. When a sister-in-law mentioned that they have old memories, Ishtiaq said 'Apa, we would make a nice marble monument in the yard for your memo-

ries'. On February 19, there was a dinner for me at my brother-in-law Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury's house to which he was invited. Sufia was sick and I went to pick Ishtiaq up and take him to the dinner. While entering the house, I tried to introduce my uncle Samad to him. He rebuked me for doing so by saying that I must be joking as he knows 'mama' very well. He did not talk much but seemed to enjoy coming to the party. I happily put the food (all vegetables and a small portion of fish) on his plate -- he ate quietly and left soon afterwards. On the 20th, we visited him for the last time and said good-bye at about 10 pm. He was in bed half-asleep. He held our hands and said he feels good whenever he sees us. I did talk to him once again on phone in Dhaka before leaving on February 22 and several times on return. On each occasion, he recognised me but could only speak feebly on phone for a minute or two.

On July 8, I heard the news of his being taken to Birdem Hospital in a semi-conscious state when his daughter Raina called me from London. She was crying, said she was leaving next day and asked me to pray so that she can see her father. I called Sufia on Friday, she told me that Ishtiaq was in ICU but the doctors were hoping to stabilise him and bring him back to his cabin soon. Alas, on Saturday about 11am Washington time Syeduzzaman called me from Dhaka to inform that Ishtiaq had passed away. We both knew that we had just lost an invaluable, loving and steadfast friend of more than a half-century.

It would be hard for me to look back on my life without thinking of Ishtiaq's gracious and large presence. Our Dhaka visits will never be the same again without the warm company of my friend Ishtiaq.

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preparation for a revenge on the Chechens who had already declared independence. The renewed Army action on Chechnya in 1999 turned the table in favour of the Russian government when Chechnya was again trampled under the heels of Russia which installed a pro-Russian government in Grozny after 'cleansing' it of the "Islamic terrorists." Since then the Chechen fighters who took shelter in the surrounding hills and jungles of Chechnya, are operating from their hideouts against the occupying forces. And the suicide attack on Russian, Air Force pilots within Russia suddenly appeared as a nightmare for Moscow. This resurgence on the part of the Chechen fighters was a big shock for Putin who after being elected as President, vowed in 2000 "to crush the Chechen rebellion" for good. In his election campaign for Presidency, Chechnya was Putin's trump card which he had played to his home-gallery for winning votes after reestablishing Russian rule over Chechnya.

That is why Putin Administration declared its determination to find out "where and how" the suicide bombers, considered as "a relatively new phenomenon," were being trained. Russia's Prosecutor