

Immunity to US soldiers

Matter too serious to come as fait accompli

THE agreement that the government has signed with the USA in Washington giving immunity to American soldiers against prosecution in Bangladesh-- in the event of their facing criminal charges-- has drawn the attention of the media for cogent reasons.

The first question that arises is why it was not made public. We have come to learn about it by a fortuitous turn of events when the daily *Prothom Alo* broke the news. A veil of secrecy was apparently maintained due to the sensitivity of the issue. That is where lies the reason for criticism.

The foreign ministry has said that around 50 countries across the world have already signed the pact and also that Bangladesh was the last signatory among the South Asian countries. But does that absolve the ministry of its responsibility to put the matter to public debate and bring it before parliament? There was lack of transparency and certain opaqueness in the handling of the matter, which are hard to explain.

The implications of signing the agreement are not to be ignored. Bangladesh is a signatory to the Rome Statute under which the International Criminal Court was set up in 1998. The bilateral agreement with the US goes against the spirit and contents of Article 9 of the Rome Statute, which postulates cooperation with and legal assistance to the court from the nations as the basis for its functioning. But the pact will introduce mutual arrangements for dealing with soldiers facing criminal charges, instead of handing them over to the court.

Then it appears that the constitutional provision has been bypassed as the matter was not put through the due process prescribed by our Constitution. It has been mentioned very clearly in the constitution that any pact to be signed with another country must be placed before the President and he will send the same to parliament.

Moreover, it is an issue, which may have a far-reaching impact on our foreign policy. So, before taking the final decision the matter should have been examined in all its aspects through debates both in parliament and in academic and political circles. There was no scope for trifling with public opinion in a matter of such grave importance.

The government should be well advised to place the details of the pact before parliament for discussion, since it concerns our position on international norms and statutes.

The eluding victory

From now on, we should not look back

UCK was not on our side. How else could one explain Bangladesh's defeat by one wicket at the Multan test match against Pakistan? We had it all a good lead, excellent bowling, total commitment, and of course, a strong motivation to show everyone that we could do it. History was almost in the making -- the first-ever test match win for us and that's also against a team like Pakistan. But it was not to be, sadly. Meantime we would have to wait till another opportunity beckons us to show the world that we have it in us to win.

Bangladesh team had been in a favourable position since the beginning of the match. Though the journey wasn't smooth in the second innings for them with just 154 runs in their kitty, the respectable lead of 260 runs could have been enough to secure a victory. But alas, the equation changed in the end! We are not going to dissect the team's drawbacks or faults; instead we are going to congratulate all the players for the marked improvement they have shown in their playing skills, professionalism and commitment. They seemed to possess all the required elements to win which had been a rarity before. Because of their focused attitude and decent lead, the expectation rose to such a high level that the whole nation suffered something of a heart-break after the game was over.

Let's not forget here that we are talking about a team which carried the game till the last day of the match, which managed to bowl out all but one batsman of the opposition, which had their grip on the game almost till the end, but victory just slipped through their fingers. Nevertheless, it was defeat not to be ashamed of, but to feel recharged by. The touch of sadness would always be there we got so close to the goal yet could not reach it. The expertise of the coach, Dav Whatmore seems to have rubbed off well on the players. Ever since he arrived, the team seems to have been rejuvenated. We only hope that they continue to play in the same manner, so what luck didn't favour us this time, there's always a next time. We wish them all a better luck in the future

g a m e s .

How fares secularism in India?

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THOUGH the term secularism is of recent origin its various doctrines have been taught by free thinkers of all ages as an extension of free thought. In recent times the use of the term "secularism" is associated with George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) and Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891). Holyoake expressed secularism as a quest for development of physical, moral and intellectual nature of man to his highest possible degree as an immediate duty of life. In its quest, Holyoake contended, theology was inadequate, unreliable and unbelievable. Bradlaugh as President of National Secular Society (of England) warned his followers of the attempt by the Roman Catholic Church of its use of democracy as a weapon to endanger freedoms of thought, speech and action. "The great struggle in this country" warned Bradlaugh "will not be between Free Thought and the Church of England, not between Free Thought and Dissent but between Free Thought and Rome". In belief Bradlaugh was an atheist while Holyoake was an agnostic. Bradlaugh believed that the logical consequence in the acceptance of secularism must be that man gets to atheism "if he has brains enough to comprehend". Holyoake on the other hand states that secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it advances others.

Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life and is capable of being tested by the experiences of this life. Quite naturally Christian Church is critical of such belief which totally ignores and/or denies the existence of God. Besides, the fallacy of atheism and agnosticism, in developing societies in particular, lies in the denial of the inextricable and inescapable influence religion has on the life and mind of all individuals in almost all aspects of their existence from birth to death. Even Nehruvian secularism, it has been argued, co-existed with the localized and dispersed structure of dominant caste hegemony in India. While Mahatma Gandhi and Maulana Azad spoke of secularism from the perspective of religion,

Pandit Nehru was the first in the sub-continent to accept the western concept of secularism. It is said that Nehru was an agnostic and indifferent to religion but he was deeply conscious of the grips of religion on the mind and body of man.

In his Autobiography Pandit Nehru wrote "India is supposed to be a religious country above every thing else... The spectacle of what is called religion or at any rate organised religion in India and elsewhere has filled me with horror and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation, and preservation and exploitation of vested interests". Personally he was not greatly interested in after

took place along with social and cultural regeneration and development of social and cultural consciousness in colonial India. This "communitarian" consciousness was subsequently transformed into communal consciousness. As examples Professor Panikar points out that Urdu was used by both Hindus and Muslims in northern India even in 1940s and 1950s. But the demand for Hindi to become the official language introduced in the Hindu consciousness led to the emergence of nationalist slogan of Hindi, Hindu, and Hindustan while Urdu was seen as the language of the Muslims. Equally the *Garaksha Andolan* (movement for the protection of the cows) brought in the sharp division between the Muslims and the Hindus as the opponent (rightly or wrongly) or supporter of

their politics. Muslims in India appear to be particularly at greater risk because of the strong historical sense among the Hindus of the fact that since the creation of Pakistan was on communal ground the Indian Muslims of today can engineer another partition and/or encourage centrifugal forces in Indian politics. It is somehow forgotten that the Indian Muslims had voted with their feet against the partition of India by choosing to remain in India. The Gujarat genocide reinforced most strongly India's majority-minority syndrome in which the two groups were so asymmetrical that results of any communal confrontation were clearly predictable in discrimination, humiliation, marginalisation, exclusion and

tion of Indian society appears to be totally oblivious of the religious demographic structure of India and is ready to deny equal citizenship, guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, to minority communities. There is no denying the fact that this improvident philippic by the majority community in India is stoked by acrimonious and often vitriolic pronouncements from Pakistan and constant across the border incursions along the line of control in Kashmir. But to fault VP Singh's point that if the claim of Ramjanambumi is conceded then there would be no ground to deny the Sikhs their demand for Khalistan and such other separatist demands would be to deny poly-centricity of Indianism and reflect to an extent soleriosis of Indian free thought.

In Indian oppositional analysis of

power which in turn necessitated the incorporation of the dalits and lower caste people into an anti-Muslim contract. Such incorporation of dalits and lower caste adivasis, if not possible socially, had to be done at the political level lest they join the rank of anti-brahmanical framework. Clearly BJP's future strategy would be to become a majority party in parliament by not only holding on to the supporters of Hindu nationalists but also doing out socio-economic benefits to the middle class and declassed millions.

That religion will not cease to be a powerful force in Indian politics is to state the obvious. For India to prosper it would make sense in not putting secularism and religious orthodoxy as binary opposites. A pluralist India aimed at further arrest of social fracture would be an essential pre-requisite for a thriving democracy and a robust

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life and found this life sufficiently absorbing to fill his mind. In contrast Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, in his presidential address at Lahore in 1940 declared, "Islam and Hinduism are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but in fact different and distinct social orders, and it is only a dream that Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality... to toky together two such nations under a single state... must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built up for the government of such a state".

Is one then to assume that communal politics in India is a recent phenomenon? Noted Indian historian KK Panikkar (Communalism and its Impact on India-KN Panikkar-1997 Montreal Lecture at C E R A R) believes that a communalism is a modern phenomenon which emerged during the 19th century and then intensified during the 20th century in India. According to Panikkar, during the course of the 19th century a process of communalisation of the society

the movement. As a result a series of communal riots took place in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Professor Panikkar subscribes to the view that communal riots are episodic as a result of and as a consequence of communal politics and riots have been the beginning of communalisation. Nineteen twenties saw the ideological elaboration of Hindu communalism as a response to the Khilafat movement of the Muslims. Indeed the partition of India in 1947, according to Panikkar, was the final expression and articulation of communalisation of Indian society. Unfortunately even fifty years after the partition communalism is a common phenomenon in the three countries of the sub-continent. In India Hindu communalists hold Muslims of today responsible for what their co-religionists supposedly did several centuries ago, a scene repeated by the majority community in Pakistan and Bangladesh as the ruling classes in all the three countries had used in varying degrees communalism as an ideology of

Rajeev Bhargava).

Despite the realisation that the durability of the Indian nation-state may depend to a large extent on the dissolution of the majority-minority syndrome, a powerful section of the Indian society believes that the Nehruvian secularism as a political philosophy has effectively lost its credibility. It has proved unable as a national motivating and unifying force because all separatist movements without exception have in common at their ideological level their hatred of Hinduism. This sec

Gujarat episode is best described as passage to fascism. They argue that two political principles had fundamentally been undermined by the Gujarat riots: (a) the minority community is to be held responsible for every individual or group action or political trend within the community; and (b) the majority community has the right to exact retribution from the minority community without the due process of law. They further emphasise on the deliberative character of the initiation and the execution of the riots in order to achieve higher phase of fascism of the state. BJP's rise to power is based on its successful articulation of the mass movement of Ramjanambum as reflective of both Hindu and Indian nationalism which captured the imagination of many people who felt that the majoritarian interests were not being adequately looked after. Therefore communalisation of politics (which had remained dormant to a large extent during the long Congress rule) had to be rejuvenated for sustenance of

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OPINION

Political patronisation of crime and terror

OMAR KHASRU

THE excessive and insufferable crime and terrorism in this country and the vice-grip stranglehold on the community may have a variety of social, historical and institutional reasons. But the main and immediate reasons for the profusion of infraction, transgression and terror in the society are political patronage of criminals and sponsorship of their illicit acts by the powerful and influential people, especially and frequently with links to the ruling coterie, and an unholy nexus among criminals, cops and politicians. The evidence of these is strewn all over the place. One gets definite inkling of the sordid state of affairs from everyday news reports.

In a front page item, *Prathom Alo* (August 31, 2003) reported that six listed top terrorists participated in the ruling party gathering and procession at Khulna on Friday, 29 August. The gathering and demonstration were led by Khulna Mayor, ruling party MPs and other high ranking leaders. The police supposedly have been digging deep, searching long and hard and leaving no stone unturned to apprehend these notorious and despicable crime bosses. Police incidentally provided efficient and professional escort and guard to the procession.

The lack of scruples, integrity and ethics among those wielding political power, authority and influence is at the crux of criminal ascendance and excess of intimidation and violence. Life in this country is meandering along with empty pledges, unfulfilled promises, despairing existence and unspeakable acts of crime.

There is no indication that things will get better, with the present cast of characters in the political arena, anytime soon. In the recent spate of murder of prominent political figures in Khulna, Dhaka and elsewhere, two major parties have blamed each other, as they habitually, repeatedly and insidiously do. This customary blame game, without proper investigation or established facts is devious, disconcerting, disgusting and deceitful. Most people, however, feel and believe that either or both parties may be correct in their assertion. That demonstrates the extent of, or lack of any trust, confidence and esteem public have for these political parties.

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for sanctuary is granted, Avi will ceremonially join the ruling party. In the existing political culture, that action of course will singularly wash away all his ostensible sins and absolve him of all alleged misdeeds.

One has to come to the disturbing and distressing realisation that all major political parties undeniably have close-knit contact with criminal godfathers and cadres. Major political parties have become equal opportunity users, ushers, usurpers, clients and customers of criminal bands and illegal activities.

The politicians, despite sanctimonious pledges and pompous utterances, are more in sync with the criminal elements than the decent, law-abiding citizens, whom they vowed under constitutional oath, to serve. With very few exceptions, they could not care less for the wellbeing of the common people and the good of the country.

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THE recent gunfire at Joypurhat and the subsequent unearthing of clandestine militant cells in the north-eastern and southern districts should come as a wake-up call to all of us, irrespective of partisan affiliation and social class, who cherish our Republic's welfare. Terrorism inspired by religious fanaticism is a fact of life in every corner of the world, and Bangladesh is no exception. No matter how loud we proclaim our credentials as a moderate Muslim democracy, no matter how much we deny the existence of these shadowy groups, the bitter facts are becoming more apparent every passing day. For there are amongst us those who have no intention of being moderate, understand little of the Islam preached by our Prophet and saints like Moinuddin Chisti (RA) and Shahjalal (RA), and have absolute contempt for democracy.

These folks are here, they are well funded, well motivated, and evidently well-armed. Their intentions are not hidden any more either. They seek to create a perfect militant theocratic state upon the corpse of an albeit imperfect pluralist democracy they loathe. This is the same democracy that required a down payment of three million martyrs and regular installment payments of hundreds more every time autocracy raised its ugly head. The names and methods of these shadowy outfits are different. Yet, their objective is the same: undermining our democracy by unleashing terror in the hearts of helpless citizens. If protecting the life and

liberty of its citizens is the prime duty of a government, as indeed it ought to be, then the government of the day has its work cut out for it.

Simply banning a given organisation and arresting a few cadres is but a temporary cure. Such measures, as temptingly alluring as they are, correspond to giving chemotherapy to address cancer when what is needed is to cut off the tumour. As we have seen elsewhere shadowy groups which are proscribed simply change their name and start their evil work under a new signboard. Far more comprehensive measures are needed to combat this menace.

Most importantly there must be the political will to acknowledge the problem and crackdown both on the underground terrorist networks and their above-ground friends.

Let us call it as it is. While the terrorist cells are found in the remotest corners of the country, some of their sympathisers are ensconced rather close to the centers of power in Dhaka. The occasional speeches by certain members of parliament are not exactly too different from the pamphlets found in these cells. If the government believes that by giving a little bit of ground to certain elements it will buy the loyalty of like-minded groups around the country, it is being blissfully naïve. Groups that have a philosophical contempt for pluralist democracy can rarely be co-opted permanently into the democratic order.

Rather, they use democratic power to arrange the funeral of democracy from the inside. Recent human history is replete with examples like Spain and Germany in the 1930s and

Czechoslovakia in the 1940s where democratic appeasement of non-democratic forces eventually resulted in the death of democracy.

It will be wise for the government to review the list of its purported friends. Can groups whose ideology was rabidly anti-Bangladesh and who to date have never apologised for their 1971 role be counted as permanent allies of democracy? One needs to look no further than some of the major educational campuses to see how well treated the ruling party's own student wing is at the hands of its nominal friends.

On the eve of American general elections in 1996, Republican candidate Bob Dole said that Democratic Bill Clinton was his adversary, not his enemy. Senator Dole was simply describing the ground rules for political partisanship in a democratic order. The BNP government ought not to think of the Awami League as an enemy but rather an adversary. The same goes for the Awami League as well. As disparate as they appear from time to time and as mutually acrimonious as their leaders can be, these two parties have a vested interest in the republican democracy that both struggled to establish through the nine years of autocratic rule. No, the enemy is an ideology that openly disdains the very concepts of liberty, equality, and democracy. This enemy believes that the end justifies the means. Be it terrorism, armed insurrection, hateful literature, and even pure murder, the enemy knows of no bounds in its effort to subjugate our people under its warped sense of the divine mandate.

The machinery of state that has

so often been used to intimidate political opposition and professionals' association can better be deployed to thwart the real enemy lurking in the shadows. Will it not be wiser to deploy the heavy hand of the police to hunt down terrorists instead of raiding women's dormitories? Can we not send BDR battalions to uproot shadowy militants instead of using them to stop Opposition rallies? While we are at it, why not spare an army battalion from Liberian peace-keeping and have it flush out the hatemongers in our own backyard?

Some time ago the government launched Operation Clean Heart with much fanfare. After the recent discoveries of militant outfits in several rural areas, may be it is time to trigger an Operation Clean Heart to cleanse our hearth of armed bigots whose shadowy dens of hate are seemingly far more numerous and more spread out than previously believed.

Left unattended in today's global situation, the tumour of fanatical militancy can only grow ominously. The only cure for a tumour, before it turns into a full fledged cancer in the body politic, is to cut it out. It is the duty of this government to resolve itself to fight the militant menace without delay. It is a fight in which no mercy can be shown and no quarter given. Unleash the security forces on their hideouts, freeze their assets and bank accounts, lodge cases against them in the courts, and prevent them from using sanctified houses of worship as meeting halls. Our reputation depends on it, our peace depends on it, our way of life depends on it.

Our democracy depends on it.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

Big mouth politicians

We, the ordinary citizens, are always curious to know about the actual characteristics of our politicians. We hardly know about their actual attitudes. Are all the politicians patriotic? Do they really deserve to be voted to rule? Do they really work for the benefits of the people who elect them? Are they committed to the promises they make before the election?

I believe that the politicians of our country have one thing in common and that is: they all talk much and work less. Time has come to change this trend. For the benefit of our

motherland, we need a government which is committed to the people's needs.