

Arms recovery

Let's strike at its root

ONCE again the law enforcers have recovered heavy weapons in Bandarban, following a firefight with terrorists. It is evident that the conduits of arms supply are very much open. And the types of the weapons recovered, which include anti-tank mines and rocket launchers, clearly indicate that they might have been dispatched for some terrorist group involved in insurgency or subversive activities on a large scale.

Now, the recovery of those weapons has ensured, at least for this time, that they did not end up in the hands of terrorists. That was highly desirable, but the concern regarding the arms trade and supply still remains. We have been watching that heavy loads of sophisticated weapons are entering the country from time to time, though the law enforcers could not discover their ultimate destinations. And that is precisely where the failure lies. The mysteries behind the arms hauls are yet to be resolved. The challenge before the law enforcers is to get at the root of the problem. The arms supply lines have to be closed and the men behind the illegal trade must be brought to justice. There is no way to feel smug with the recovery of arms, because the possibility of some consignments being not detected by the law enforcers cannot be ruled out.

The supply of arms can further destabilise the society already reeling under chronic lawlessness. Law and order will deteriorate if terrorists and criminals have access to deadly weapons. And the failure to cut off the supply lines is a reflection on the performance of the law enforcers.

The discovery of combat-grade heavy weapons is a reminder of the alarming truth that terrorists and arms traders have, for some reason or the other, chosen Bangladesh as a transit route. Their plan has to be thwarted in order to prevent subversive activities. Any failure in this respect will be costly for us.

Chill in the air

Needed immediate steps to mitigate sufferings

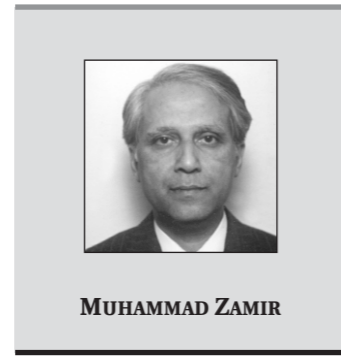
THE weather forecasters have said that the cold wave is likely to stay for a few more days. As the temperature dips further, sufferings will increase; complications will arise. We should not waste time to take necessary actions to mitigate the sufferings of common people, specially the poor, as much as possible. Hospitals, clinics, pharmacies should stock up enough medicines in case there is a rise in cold related illness. Pneumonia has already cost many lives, especially of children, even before the winter had set in. There were stories of hospitals, health officials not prepared for the sudden spread of the disease. We hope similar scenes would be avoided this time.

Then there is the dense fog which is disrupting life not only in general but specifically navigation in inland waterways. Ferries carrying passengers must not be allowed to be overcrowded, and should also not be allowed to sail unless a clear sign is given by the terminals. We lost far too many precious lives last year in ferry disasters, we don't want to loose any more in the new year. Government must ensure the safety of the passengers by giving strict instructions to the terminal officials.

It's always the poor section of the population that suffers the most during such natural calamities. They neither have enough warm clothing nor do they have enough food to survive. Here the local government outfits as well as NGOs have an effective role to play. They must take adequate measures to protect this group of people. For example, collect old warm clothes from house to house, set up a fund with donations both individual and institutional and use their outfits scattered all over the country to distribute them wherever needed.

Severe cold spell is a phenomenon of the nature that has been seasonally visiting our country for last few years. But lives of innocent people become casualty of such natural whims thanks to lack of preparedness; we must not allow it to repeat all over again.

Muslims in France and Europe in general



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

FRANCE'S efforts to preserve the country's secular identity while integrating France's Muslim population (the largest in Western Europe) has drawn attention once again to the Islamic identity as existent in Europe. The very fact that a Presidential Commission was set up (headed by former minister Bernard Stasi) to seriously investigate the implication of religion in a secular culture is itself significant.

The idea that conspicuous religious symbols like Jewish skull-caps, prominent display of Christian crosses or head scarves can hurt the imparting of education in educational institutions has now transcended social boundaries and assumed political overtones. President Chirac's support for a law in this regard has lent greater importance to this idea. Apparently, henceforth, discreet medallions and pendants which merely confirm a person's religious faith will be allowed. It is being assumed that such a manifestation will not affect social peace and national cohesion.

The problem probably lies in the fact that in France, secondary education is part of the central responsibility of the State. That connotes the factor that nothing can be encouraged that might affect the principle of secularism that is state policy.

This has raised important questions -- the first being one of identity and what it means to be French. To this has been added the latent fear of a radicalised French Islam. Unfortunately, the dynamics in recent times has been such, that some of the far right, ultra conservative elements in France have

ended up in stigmatising French Muslims.

The 'Economist' has pointed out that Muslims are hardly new in France and history of migration from North Africa to France goes back to the early 20th century. They have however observed that contrary to earlier practice, the Muslim girls are choosing to wear their head-scarf young, and continuing to do so into adulthood. This trend also appears to be most marked among the educated teenagers, whose mothers in most cases either never wore the veil, or

Europe.

In France, the issue has acquired several connotations. The contentious nature of the debate now also includes subjects like separate hours for Muslim women in public swimming pools and whether veils can be worn in public offices or in public schools. The differences have divided France and as an analyst has put it, "cut across left and right". Unfortunately for the sociologists, educationists and the culture gurus, the situation has acquired added political resonance with regional elections in

Europe's wider relationship with Islamic countries. European policy makers believe that they can contribute not only to the integration of Muslims in Europe but also towards further mutual understanding on how to strengthen a democratic and multicultural Union with shared common values.

This positive approach of trying to find common denominators has started with steps to recognise the important civilising role which Muslims have played in the historical development of Europe. It is

among the less fortunate percentage of the population. In Europe, the economically challenged include most of the Muslim community. Their economic status has also led them to become more insular. They also sadly suffer from the fall-out of prejudice. It is this situation that also makes it necessary for intercultural dialogue to be based clearly on mutual respect, equality and solidarity. Different sides in Europe should not lose sight of the historical and cultural ties that bind them closely together. Islamic and European

clout. Currently, similar behaviour by established European parties would be difficult to imagine. Such a course of action would probably lead them to risk losing, not gaining votes.

Another area which continues to suffer is the lack of Muslims in leadership positions in Europe. There is a marked lack of representation. While there are a few Muslim parliamentarians in Germany, not a single Muslim is a federal or state Minister. Including Muslims in leadership positions is crucial. In this context the key lies in education changing people's perceptions. The media can also play a crucial role in furthering open-discussion.

Young, second and third generation Muslims sometimes feel culturally and intellectually alienated in Europe because they do not know sometimes to which culture they belong. At times they also feel that their political views go unnoticed. What is required is true inclusion. This will then reduce the impact of the bloodline being the sole entitlement to citizenship and foster a sense of civic belonging which has gained ground among the immigrant community in the US and in Canada.

The real debate is not what to do with Muslims in the midst of Europe but whether Europeans are going to consider integration as a two-way street. This has to become a reality. This can be greatly facilitated through the exchange of values and opinions between the two cultures. This is crucial.

This will not be easy. Muslims in Europe are not a homogenous group. They are divided by linguistic, social, sectarian and political factors. Nevertheless, this obstacle can be overcome with patience and understanding. In the long run that will make Europe richer. This would be the best way to reduce the unfortunate rise of xenophobia and Islam phobia in many parts of Europe.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

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actively fought to be liberated from it.

What makes the sociological implications that much more interesting is the fact that the two schoolgirls from Aubervilliers, an industrial suburb of Paris, who started this controversy have an Algerian-born mother who does not wear a headscarf and that their father is Jewish. That indeed is a melting pot. This situation that has developed in France is symbolical of a greater and wider phenomenon that is presently sweeping across Western Europe and also some parts of the USA, Canada and Australia.

The wearing of scarves by young Muslim girls denote not only their efforts to send a protective message about themselves to potential harassers, but also a reflection that they have a separate ethnic cultural identity. This appears to be more of a second-generation trend, where ethnic individuality is more marked in the children of immigrants than among their parents who originally arrived in a new socio-cultural frontier. By doing so, these young people are rocking the boat of integration that is being sought so earnestly in the wider

France due next March.

One aspect is clear. The question of Islam and the status of Muslims in Europe have come into sharp focus once again.

There is today a changing perception of Muslims in Europe after the events of 11 September. While the number of Muslims in Europe have steadily grown (currently about 19 million), incomprehension and fear seem to dominate the minds of the non-Muslim Europeans. It is against this scenario that the policy makers throughout Europe are trying to stimulate dialogue and with it a better understanding of the issues at stake. It is being hoped by the European leadership that this will contribute to the dissemination of best practice among all stakeholders and decision-makers.

Particular attention is also being paid to the role of the media and civil society in shaping issues surrounding the inclusion of Muslims in European societies. The urgency for finding an acceptable solution for the successful integration of its Muslim citizens is also stemming from the awareness that this will have an impact on

being stressed in this context that intercultural dialogue is "the only way to build a bridge to the world of tomorrow" and that questions of culture and its understanding should not be ignored in a world dominated by security concerns.

This approach is the correct path. Furthering cultural and religious understanding is definitely necessary to reinvigorate Euro-Mediterranean relations. This has been impacted by the radicalisation of opinions prompted by changing world events. It must not be forgotten that there are tremendous challenges ahead both for Europe and the Mediterranean regions -- EU-enlargement, the inclusion of new languages and religions, changes in migratory flows, etc. It needs to be also remembered that the substantial majority of Muslim migrants to Europe are from North Africa. Pluralism is needed and this can only come through increased dialogue.

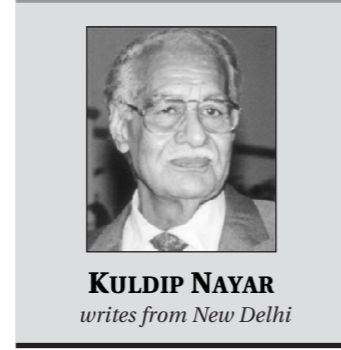
We have to remember that one of the detrimental aspects of globalisation is potential increase of already existing social asymmetries and erosion of the social fabric. This is particularly true

civilisations could not have developed, one without the other.

The most important component in this regard has to be education. This has to be the main pillar on which dialogue and understanding needs to be built, not only for women and children, but also for adults. What is needed are long-term and short-term action, with a focus on shared 'best practice' as has been set forth in the European Union's Wider Neighbourhood agenda. This will help in defeating the clashes of ignorance.

A key problem in Europe today, particularly in comparison with the US, has been the comparative 'disassociation' of Muslims within the European cultural melting pot. Comparably, Muslims in the US appear to feel more integrated. This is probably because no matter how critical Muslims might be of current US foreign policy, they tend to speak as citizens. American Muslims have also been recognised by leading US parties as a political force to be reckoned with. This was reflected in the way the Republican Party embraced them before the 2002 elections. This gave them a so-called psychological

Will shadows lengthen in New Year?



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

IF a New Year were to be a break with the past, what a clean slate it would be to start from? There would be no baggage to carry, no failures to recall and no betrayals to irk. The year 2003 crushed a plethora of dreams under the debris of realities.

Two of them cast their shadow on the New Year. One is Kashmir and the other, the strengthening of the BJP. In fact, one affects the other. The two may well upset the applecart and bring to naught any plans for understanding between India and Pakistan.

Take Kashmir first. It has got unnecessarily linked with the SAARC summit which taboos discussion on bilateral issues. The Pakistan establishment does not seem to realise that any solution to Kashmir can be posterior to a favourable climate, not prior to it.

Many Pakistanis have told me that once India accepts Kashmir a disputed territory, the talks can go on for years. No government at New Delhi can do so because the state of Jammu and Kashmir has been spelled out as the territory of India in its constitution. But Pakistan's insistence on this point is futile. When New Delhi has held a series of meetings on Kashmir, it

has indirectly conceded that this part of the country is under discussion. Even after winning the Bangladesh war, Indira Gandhi agreed with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in June 1972 at Shimla that the negotiations between the two countries would take place subsequently for "a final settlement of Jammu and Kashmir."

Taking advantage of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's presence, Islamabad has built up a case to initiate talks on Kashmir. There is nothing wrong in it. But

on differences despite the various steps taken towards normalcy. They disseminate news and views in such a way that people are aroused on both sides. Apparently, the two governments give them directions every day because theirs is a daily reaction to the occurrences. The language used and the programmes devised cannot be off their own bat. Why can't the propaganda of hate be stopped forthwith?

India-Pakistan relations have survived the onslaught of official

walls that fear and distrust have raised on the borders will crumble and the peoples of the subcontinent, without giving up their separate identities, will one day work together for the common good. This might usher in an era fruitful beyond their dreams. This is the faith I have cherished ever since I left my hometown, Sialkot, in Pakistan in September 1947. And this is the straw I have clung to in the sea of hatred and hostility that has engulfed India and Pakistan for long.

winning elections in Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Rajasthan, would settle down and plug the line of development and governance to soften the Hindutva propaganda, as it did during the polls. But I find the RSS guiding the three governments and the chief ministers saying it proudly. The new development is a direct induction of the RSS *pracharaks* (preachers) in the cabinets in all the three states. They are going to play a key role in the next general election.

What it denotes is that the RSS is

BETWEEN THE LINES

Another term of the BJP may encourage them to make wholesale changes in history, heritage and even the legal system. Political system is increasingly becoming a hostage to fanatics and extremists. India's ethos of pluralism is in danger. One silver lining, however, is the alliance of non-BJP forces. Sonia Gandhi's statement that the Congress wants a joint front and that it will leave the question of prime ministership to it is a hopeful development.

this has downgraded the SAARC which may one day provide an answer to Kashmir. The SAARC delineates the contours of the South Asian Union. The organisation should be strengthened, not diluted. The first step should be the constitution of SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement) and SAFTA (South Asian Preferential Agreement). Vajpayee has offered economic cooperation to normalise the situation. This will help trade and travel that are the sinews of any rapprochement.

The important point to worry about is the tone of hostility in the official media. Doordarshan, with a 24-hour news channel, the Pakistan TV and the radio networks of the two countries continue to harp

media or of those who are determined to sabotage any effort towards normalcy. The last 56 years have not been easy, with the three wars and the Kargil misadventure thrown in. What evokes confidence in both the countries is the recognisable desire of peoples to live in peace. That sentiment is so deep and wide that it cannot be brushed aside anymore. I recall that when we lit candles at Wagah border a decade ago on the night of August 14-15, we were only a dozen-odd people. Last August there were two lakh on the Indian side and nearly half a lakh on the Pakistan side, raising slogans of Hind-Pak dosti (India-Pakistan friendship).

I have no doubt that the high

The rising graph of the BJP is, indeed, disturbing. It raises question about India's ethos of secularism. What the US State Department has said in its latest report is largely true: "There is a gradual but continual institutionalisation of Hindutva in India," marked by "politicised inculcation of Hindu religious and cultural norms to the exclusion of other religious norms." The annual report on what is a treatise of international religious freedom says: "Hindutva often synonymous with cultural nationalism, excludes other religious beliefs and fosters religious intolerance."

That the BJP is the ruling party makes things worse. I was prepared to believe that the BJP, after

confident that its ideology has come to be accepted. They do not hide behind the cultural discourse any more. They openly preach Hindutva and have made it clear that this will be their plank for the Lok Sabha election. They do not want to admit that the BJP is their political limb because Vajpayee still pulls many liberals towards him on the belief that he is not "as bad as L K Advani." The strengthening of the BJP has also encouraged another member of the Sangh parivar. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has said that it will "reconvert" those Hindus who had "become Christians." It has said that its job will be easier because they have their own governments in Rajasthan, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh.

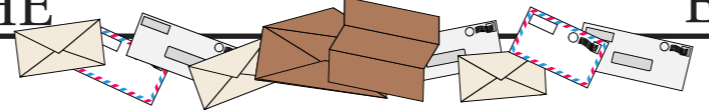
Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi has become so blatant in his extremist behaviour that he wants to take on even the Supreme Court which has criticised the state for the manner in which the riot cases have been pursued. His government has raised the fears of communal disturbances returning to the state if the Supreme Court transfers out the trial of any of the Gujarat riot cases. He does not want to change his communal outlook. Nor does he want the victims to get justice. There is still an economic boycott of Muslims.

With secular forces in disarray and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi not making the grade, the return of another NDA, headed by the BJP, cannot be ruled out. This may spell disaster to all liberal values in India. Saffronisation may come to acquire a deep coat of Hindutva.

Ministers like Murl Manohar Joshi have already polluted the fields of education, information, culture and even medicine. Another term of the BJP may encourage them to make wholesale changes in history, heritage and even the legal system. Political system is increasingly becoming a hostage to fanatics and extremists. India's ethos of pluralism is in danger. One silver lining, however, is the alliance of non-BJP forces. Sonia Gandhi's statement that the Congress wants a joint front and that it will leave the question of prime ministership to it is a hopeful development. This also takes the wind out of the BJP's sails that casting vote in favour of the Congress would mean bringing in the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi as the country's prime minister.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

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.

PM's visit to DU

Recently our venerable Prime Minister visited Dhaka University for conferring gold medals to the meritorious students of various departments for their outstanding performance in honors final exam. She, accompanied by a good number of cabinet members delivered a very efficacious speech which was very conducive for students to attain excellent grade in their forthcoming exams. About halfway in her speech, she pointed out the golden past that is its involvement in many successful revolutions including our glorious liberation war. Now our student leaders are busy fulfilling their own selfish desires. Frequently they engage themselves in clashes with their rival groups over political issues which result in strikes that halt the regular curriculum activities. The tug of war takes a heavy toll on general students as they get embroiled in traumatic session jams. But our premier dexterously evaded this issue though once she had promised to pull out this obnoxious knot from all educational institu-

tions. She also evaded another important issue. In the heydays of DU all the teachers were appointed on the basis of their merit and calibre. At that time, UGC directly recruited the most eligible candidate in a systematic process so that there was no political interference. But now teachers are designated based on their political loyalty. For that reason DU, the highest learning seat of our country, has been losing its previous glory.

She ignored the university ordinance of 1973 which gave the teachers legal right to exercise free and fair politics. It is not the politics that is to blame, but it's the party lineage of the teachers she seems to put a cover on. Is it because she needs some like-minded intelligentsia who would not question her actions?

The existing ambience of DU will not change as long as these

problems are not resolved. **Mahadev Kumar Das**
Jagannath Hall
Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000.

Imam training: A pragmatic step

Imam training programme initiated by the present government is not only a pragmatic step but also a timely one. Imams are the most venerable people of our society. Most of the people of our country, particularly those coming from the illiterate background, believe everything the Imam says. If Imams are to involve in the social activity after given proper training and education, viz sanitation, family planning and the like, they can contribute much toward our society, imparting this knowledge to the poor and the destitute. We came to know through BBC that approximately 600 Imams have

been imparted training across Bangladesh. We urge the government that all imams be trained compulsorily so that we get maximum benefit from them.

Aminul Islam
Surya Sen Hall
4th Year Economics, Dhaka University

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman

Many of our Awami League leaders say that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the father of the nation. They do not care for Shaheed Ziaur Rahman. Many of our BNP leaders say that Shaheed Ziaur Rahman is the announcer of independence. They do not care for Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Both the Awami League and the BNP leaders always quarrel among themselves, disdain and disparage each other on the matter.

Why such mentality, discord and antipathy? Can't they solve the matter and arrive at a consensus of opinion?

We feel that had there been no Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman there had been no independence.

We also feel that had there been no Shaheed Ziaur Rahman there had been no proclamation of war.

It is therefore imperative that all of us should recognise and honour Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as father of the nation and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman as father of liberation war for the sake of unity and amity among our people and in the greater interest of our country.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203.

Tribute to our heroes

First of all I would like to salute those brave boys the country has ever produced. I am speaking of our peacekeepers whose sad demise has led us crying on the eve of the New Year. But I have some question regarding the mourning day observed on the last day of the year. When I went outside I did not find any sign of mourning other than the National flag hoisted half-mast. Even the ceremony that was held to receive the bodies of the dead was probably also monotonous. Above all the relatives of the dead were no doubt depressed. When I made a phone call at the Army Headquarters in the noon, I was informed that the plane carrying the bodies would arrive at 7 p.m. It happened accordingly but it is very unfortunate to mention the punctuality of our honorable

Prime Minister. Because of her delay the bereaved members were kept standing for nearly an hour. It looked odd and it is also a matter of shame isn't it? I agree that there were some formalities and at last the PM condescended the family members of the death officers. But it was a mourning day and the PM did not have much problem had she come a bit early. If it involved the arrival of a head of state, had she been late then? Certainly not. And as it involved our heroes killed almost a week ago, a delay by the PM was unfortunate.

I would like to pray to the Almighty for the salvation of the departed souls. And I believe that the delay by the PM was not intentional. The government should take care of the family members and should pay attention so that they would not have to lead an unfortunate life.

Moinul Alam
Dhaka.