

Heading towards a deeper conflict

Please step back before it's too late

No sooner had we editorially appreciated the opposition's refraining from hartal call immediately following the government's strong-arm handling of the Hawa Bhaban siege programme than came the anti-climax. They have given call for shutdowns on 28 and 29 April. We optimistically dubbed it as a sign of maturity adding that a positive sign should be read into it much the same way that the JCD's withdrawal from Sudha Bhaban siege programme was a wise move away from the edge of an impending physical confrontation. But, we have been proved wrong, and sadly so.

Of course, we warned the government of the consequences of 'sealing off all the avenues for the opposition to assemble, hold rallies and put their points across to the people' that 'might lead them to go back on the hartal course which we dread so much.' But the opposition should not labour under the impression that their hartal programme announced for 28th and 29th April could be justified on any ground whatsoever. This is more because of the fact that their use of alternatives to hartal spurred on a popular expectation that a 'no-hartal regimen' was here to stay. The people were getting accustomed to human chains, mass rallies and even the no-confidence demonstrations hoping that these will be given a fuller run.

Deplorably, on the one hand, we have the opposition's patently undemocratic and highly intimidating agenda for toppling the government; and on the other, we have a BNP-led coalition government breaking all laws of the land in the name of countering opposition programmes which has degenerated into arresting innocent people and harassing citizens on an appalling scale.

This is conflictive politics at its worst. What lies in store is terribly upsetting, disquieting. From today, up until April 30, the so-called opposition-prophesied doomsday for the government, there will be an intensified series of Awami League programmes designed for hartal days and for staging mass rallies, sit-in demonstrations onwards. The BNP is set to take the field with its set of counter-programmes.

All this conjures up a re-entry into the dark tunnel we thought we had consigned to oblivion. This is a lose-lose vortex the ruling coalition and the opposition party are getting thrown into. It is not even a lose-win situation; neither of the parties can emerge a winner from it. What is more stupendous, the nation will be the ultimate loser, and the people the greatest sufferer. Leaders are meant to lead us to a better time, not to a more depressive situation. But, it's a shame they are ushering us into hell-fire. Please, step back, before it is too late!

Bangabandhu Murder Case

Appointment of ad-hoc judge a pressing need now

We look with trepidation at the prospect that the process of final adjudication of the Bangabandhu Murder Case might be further delayed. In fact, the latest turn of events makes us wonder whether the case will ever come to an end. We have reasons to feel this way. Though the hearing of the case was supposed to resume in March 2005 with the elevation of a judge to the Appellate Division, there is apprehension that the government decision to extend the retirement age of Supreme Court judges will further delay it till 2007.

Five of the seven judges at the Appellate Division cannot hear the case since they either heard the case in the High Court or expressed embarrassment to hear the case at different times. The rest of the two judges can hear the case now, but the Appellate Division needs at least three judges to form a bench to hear the case. Therefore, if the parliament amends the constitution to extend the retirement age of Supreme Court judges by two years, none of the five judges who are not able to hear the case, will retire until 2007; further delaying the appointment of new judges who will have no qualms in hearing the case.

Against the backdrop of what has been perceived by many as government's lukewarm attitude to drawing a curtain on the Bangabandhu Murder Case, one might be led to surmise that the amendment to extend the retirement age of judges bore some link to government's overall approach to the issue. We would, however, like to keep faith with the government's oft-repeated assertion that the law will take its own course and that the court will resolve the case in due time. What is supremely important to realise is that this is no ordinary murder case. We owe it not only to his memory but also to the entire nation that those who brutally assassinated the founder of the state along with most other members of his family are brought to justice.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of the government to see to it that all the obstacles are removed in the way of bringing the case to a close. There is a special provision to meet the exigency. Appointing a judge on an ad-hoc basis has become even more compelling in the present scenario. We demand that the government take resort to such an ad-hoc appointment immediately so as to resolve the case without any further delay.

Chittagong arms seizure

Directionless investigation?

When the world is pooling efforts to circumvent the scourge of terrorism, and there can not be terrorism without small arms, we are seen as easy transit for these tools of terror. Can we afford to stand by and not act? ...Let us not also placate our feelings on the grounds that these weapons were meant for a third country.

BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, NDC, PSC (RETD)

SEVERAL weeks have gone by since the largest arms heist in our history was apprehended in Chittagong. The government has instituted a committee to inquire into the episode. We are neither privy to its terms of reference nor its scope of operations. Very recently the CID has been entrusted with the task of investigating into the matter. One of the matters that the policy makers and law enforcing agencies should ponder upon is the gradual increase in the quantity as well as the types of arms that are being clandestinely brought in inside Bangladesh.

For Bangladesh the issue is of great significance in several ways, most of all, it is for the regional and international ramifications of the episode, that we must delve deep into the matter. The question of our security and our standing in the committee of nations is linked with it.

It is deemed necessary to go into the issue of the 'destination' or the demand side of the equation, in some more details, because of the gravity of the issue.

First, was it meant for some groups, clandestine or overt, in Bangladesh? The contents of the arms lot suggest that these were meant for use by elements that have acquired a degree of sophistication in their training and use of very sophisticated weapons.

If we take a stock of the various underground elements, particularly those with leftist propensities, operating in Bangladesh, certain features, distinct in nature from similar groups operating around us, emerge. Those elements in Bangladesh, that swathe their activities with the name of left parties, are motivated more by economic considerations rather than any political ideology. They resort to terror tactics but do not qualify as terrorists or insurgents in the classical sense of the term, being bereft of convictions to follow or of an ideology to implement. They indulge in petty criminal activities but arrogate to themselves the name of a political party, to lend a modicum of 'credibility' and 'respectability' to their activities.

These petty thugs go about their business, in most cases, with the help of most ordinary homemade weapons. They have neither the capability nor the logistics or technical wherewithal to absorb such a huge quantity of sophisticated weapons. They are not known to have the 'real estate' to maintain the large volume of goods.'

The factor that militates against such fringe political elements involving in the demand of such a huge quantity is the tremendous cost of the lot'. The market price of the seized weapons has been estimated at around a hundred million dollars. The accretion of value of the weapons, being illicit in nature, is three to five times, depending on the number of sources and the routes they travel to get to their destination. That being so, the likelihood of the underground elements, which exist at best on the fringes of our political spectrum, of possessing the amount of cash that we are talking about, seems an improbability, if not impossibility.

Of late, there is a demand for such weapons particularly by the ULFA in Assam following the recent anti-insurgency operations by the Indian army in Bhutan. This assumption is reinforced by the statement of the head of Indian police, appearing in the press a few days after the heist, to the effect that there was indeed a meeting of

It would be unwise not to take into account also those elements with radical religious leanings, who survive, reportedly on transnational patronage and who might have some use for these weapons. Going by the reports appearing in various national dailies in Bangladesh these elements are attempting a foothold in the political arena. In fact international press reports and analysis express such apprehensions, particularly of religious elements allegedly with links to the al Qaeda. Although it has been alleged that some of them have links with the International Islamic Fronts, their activities have so far remained nebulous. Their political clout remains a mystery, their economic clout even more so.

We are thus left only with the criminal gangs that survive on political patronages, and are festered by inter-party or group rivalries. Although some of these gangs are known to be holding the types of rifles that were recently seized, we would not be able to rationalize their need for such categories, leave alone the quantity of weapons, even if we stretched our imagination to the extreme.

Thus the possibility of Bangladesh being a destination of the seized consignment is negated by the 'demand' and 'supply' factor as well as the market's 'utilization capacity rate'.

That leaves us with the 'third country options'. So far, none of the analyses have considered the LTTE in Sri Lanka as a possible recipient of such a large quantity of arms and ammunition. In fact the LTTE have all the attributes of an organized guerrilla and insurgents group, which qualify them to be the most likely user of these weapons. They had involved the Sri Lankan security forces in conventional combat in the past. However, the land route is a tortuous proposition. But, by the same token, some analysts contend the sea route to be fraught with danger, since the passage through the Bay of Bengal would confront four navies of the region. Acquiring weapons through clandestine means would create problems for the LTTE at the time of a peace negotiation, although the peace process is in a limbo at the moment.

The regional impact will be equally harmful for Bangladesh's security. India, which is currently facing insurgency in the Northeast, alleges that the rebels find sustenance through the supply channel, primarily through Bangladesh. It may consider our inability to stem the flow a cause of concern for its national security. Coupled with this is anxiety that efforts may be underway to establish a separate Muslim homeland in the Northeast comprising of the states having predominantly Muslim population carving out a 'Bhutan Bangladesh (Greater Bangladesh) in the region,' according to one Indian scholar. Far-fetched these assumptions may be and we may well pass them off as drivel, but such utterances are representative of the Indian psyche on this matter.

When the world is pooling efforts to circumvent the scourge of terrorism, and there can not be terrorism without small arms, we are seen as easy transit for these tools of terror. Can we afford to stand by and not act?

Let us not also placate our feelings on the grounds that these weapons were meant for a third country. While no effort should be spared to determine the source and destination of the consignment, we must initiate immediate actions to ensure that our territory is not used as transit for illicit weapons.

Brig Gen (retd) Shahedul Anam Khan is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs of The Daily Star.

several Indian secessionist groups last month in Bangkok to arrange for weapon replenishment.

However, some experts are of the opinion that even the insurgents and the rebel elements in the 'seven sisters' would be very hard pressed to come up with that kind of cash. This is where the nexus of weapons drugs come in. Today, money is no longer the only means of exchange of goods. Drugs have also become a legal tender in the world of illegal arms trade. Those who deal in narcotics and drugs need weapons to survive and those with illegal arms have the need for drugs. This creates a 'source' and 'means' of weapons and drugs. That being so, can we discard the possibility of involvement of a resourceful organization, or even a third party, in the whole episode?

Last but not the least is the adverse impact of unhindered diffusion of illicit arms and weapons on the security scenario of Bangladesh. The impact is both regional as well as internal in context. Certain statistics would make this point clear. There are about two hundred thousand illegal arms and weapons in Bangladesh of which twenty five per cent are in Dhaka alone.

According to press reports, there are eighty criminal gangs in the country, a large percent of which are in Dhaka. Of the more than three thousand violence-related deaths recorded in Bangladesh in 2001, fifty percent were weapons related. A significant number of the victims of gun related crimes are women and children.

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The US confronting 'Mogadishu syndrome' in Iraq?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

It is now to be seen when and how the American public acts. There are however instances of their acting positive even before Mogadishu took place. They did it on the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Lebanon intervention in '80s and then, of course, Somalia intervention. They will almost certainly do it on Iraq, too, in the end... The cycle of violence now experienced in Iraq will only thicken up Mogadishu syndrome in the country and will perhaps hasten the exit of the occupiers.

American perception, obviously, a gift must still be subject to the will of the donor.

So a wholesale loot of the Iraqi resources is planned in the garb of utilising the gift for the reconstruction of Iraq's mangled and severely crippled infrastructure by awarding contracts to the consortium of American companies. Also by giving over Iraq's natural resources to foreign ownership. Bremar is making sure that a 'sovereign' Iraq would be at the mercy of foreign masters, especially the US and take lead from Washington on everything from awarding a contract for oil exploration to building a school.

There are the kind of the grabs of the country's wealth or their ominous prospects. Muqtada al-Sadr has been denouncing from his pulpit and through the press. Obviously the occupation forces consider him a nagging problem in realising their game plan. Queerly in line with zionist policy of targeting the key leaders of the Palestinian resistance, the US is threatening Muqtada with death. Paul Bremer has issued the warrant of arrest for him. But Muqtada is as defiant as before and so are the militants loyal to him. In the meantime the occupation force has intensified its repression to break their spirit of resistance, but to no avail.

Although whole of Iraq is afame with the eruption of anti-US violence the situation obtaining in the town of Falluja has been particularly grim. It is where amidst fierce fighting the coalition forces killed 400 Iraqis in a mosque -- an event that infuriated Shias and Sunnis alike for fitting reprisal. The unprecedented brutalities witnessed in Falluja early this month was described as a 'sight up tick' in the violence of Iraq. It was the manner of their death -- set on fire, beaten with pipes and mutilated by the local crowd who then dragged charred bodies through the street and hung them upside down just above the roadway on old railway bridge across the Euphrates -- that made all the difference to remind the people back in the US of the dead American soldiers being dragged through the street of Mogadishu by cheering crowd in 1993. This was the footage that led directly to the withdrawal of US troops from Somalia.

The most visible symbol of Pax Americana will however be the American embassy in Baghdad, already touted as the largest US diplomatic mission in the world with a staff of over 3000 personnel. To give the mission real teeth and muscle the 18.4 bn Iraqi Reconstruction Fund will be the mission's sole privilege to handle over the next five years. The generous allocation from the US Congress is flaunted as 'gift from American people to the people of Iraq.' But in

But fortunately or unfortunately the American viewers were shielded

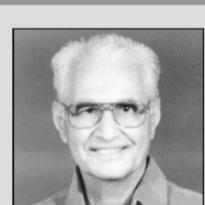
from the real ugliness of the killings of US contractors in Falluja by their television networks. Had they seen what others could see -- the obscene enthusiasm of the crowd, the blithe disregard with which local people were driving under burned American corpses half and hour later -- then President Bush would have had his Mogadishu moment instantly. But it was made sure that the Americans would never see it, but will the scar go away? At what price the American people decide that the price of occupation is too high and pull the plug on this foreign adventure -- are now the questions.

In the mid-90s there used to be a phenomenon called 'Mogadishu Line' which the US military was never supposed to cross. Roundup from eighteen US soldiers who were killed in one day in Mogadishu in 1993 it was a doctrine which ruled that the US armed forces should undertake no overseas mission that was likely to cause death of more than twenty American soldiers except vital national interests were involved. It was however not so much the number of dead Americans but the dishonour to their mortal remains that turned the US public against Somalia. For the same reason even the Falluja episode may mark a turning point. Nearly 500 American soldiers have been killed in Iraq since George Bush flew on to an aircraft carrier last May to declare the end of the 'major combat phase' of Iraq operation and their body bags despatched to the US must have affected the American psyche profoundly. Notwithstanding the varied manner in which they died the 'Mogadishu line' has since been crossed.

It is now to be seen when and how the American public acts. There are however instances of their acting positive even before Mogadishu took place. They did it on the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Lebanon intervention in '80s and then, of course, Somalia intervention. They will almost certainly do it on Iraq, too, in the end. The brutalities perpetrated by the occupation force will be followed by similar reprisal. Today it is almost forgotten that Mogadishu fury was preceded by the killings of a thousand Somalis by the Americans on the same day. The cycle of violence now experienced even in Iraq will only thicken up Mogadishu syndrome in the country and will perhaps hasten the exit of the occupiers.

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What is America up to?



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

THINGS seem inexplicable. The Americans say they want to transfer power on June 30 next. Fine. Let's ignore, at this stage, what privileges, powers and functions they reserve for themselves in Iraq after that transfer of sovereignty to the Interim Governing Council. Let's accept that IGC will become a democratic and sovereign government of Iraq. But what preparatory work are the Americans doing in the run up to the great event?

The American proconsul could legitimately be expected to prefer a political, rather than a purely military, approach to the problem posed by what is now a resistance movement against American occupation in the mainly Sunni triangle in Iraq's middle parts. Dr. Bremer or his advisors

tried to establish some contact, direct or indirect, with influential Sunni leaders, clerics or possible mediators who could say to the disaffected, indeed alienated, Iraqis

that let them draw up minimum demands and talk to a Bremer, who says he is anxious to transfer sovereignty. Instead of finding

out what did the Iraqis demand, the American chose to bomb the hell out of them? Events in Falluja speak for themselves. At the time of writing, US Army is trying to extend a temporary ceasefire that might not be acceptable. For the rest, Coalition forces are ready to give some shock and awe.

Why no political approach was adopted earlier becomes clear from the list of what the new sovereign and democratic government of Iraq shall not be able to do after becoming sovereign: it shall not interfere in any detail of oil policy -- how much is produced, to whom it is sold and at what price. Or how much oil income shall go for reinvestment or to the entrepreneurs running the business. The new government shall have no jurisdiction over the American troops who will indefinitely stay in Iraq on a permanent basis in autonomous bases. No American shall be tried by an Iraqi court. In short, the sovereign government of Iraq shall exercise its sovereignty in a way it does not interfere with America's own plans of how Iraq is to be governed. Bremer is a clear colonial architecture. If Iraqis take it to be a fraud few can blame them.

Young cleric's militia has countered with intense resistance. It means yet another and bigger Intefada. Shias being a majority

indeed ever since the modern Iraqi state was created by the British after WWI -- potential of this likely Intefada has frightened most Arab

peoples no end. What the future holds cannot be said with certainty.

Irqi Shias had until recently been quiescent. Few of their leaders could have forgotten either the 1920 massacre in the south by the British or the 1991 when the Americans double-crossed them: after inciting them to rise against Saddam Hussein's regime, they left them to be butchered by Saddam. Would the

Shias and Kurds remain discreet. The latter fear the Turks who may put down their campaign

and annex the areas north of Sulemaniya, were it not for a deed of the good Lord who chose to put a lot of oil beneath their areas. So now, the Americans will not allow their old friends, the Turks, to do what they had been non-violent. In the case of Palestinians, whatever gains they made were when their Intefada was non-violent and Israeli brutality could be seen for what it was by the rest of the world. It takes a lot of courage to stay non-violent in the

civil war -- to provide the Americans with the alibi to stay on indefinitely.

If so, will Iraqis win over Coalition troops? One would say their chances of winning independence from America - that now occupies it and seems to be ready to pay a high price for its indefinite stay - will be incomparably higher if their Intefada had been non-violent. In the case of Palestinians, whatever gains they made were when their Intefada was non-violent