

**Bomb threats***What do these imply?*

After the bomb blasts in Sylhet, there is now the palming off of threats resulting in a bomb scare and consequent alert on the part of the authorities across a large swathe of installations. Anonymous callers are mouthing these in a free run of self-confidence as though their impunity is guaranteed in a climate of confusion created by successive bombing incidents in Sylhet.

It's something of a new phenomenon we are having to face -- the threats on top of the bomb attacks may not be directly correlated but nonetheless worth taking seriously. Let's catalogue the places being targeted for the panic treatment as if these are sitting on ticking time bombs. First, the three international airports viz Osmani in Sylhet, ZIA in Dhaka and Shah Amanat in Chittagong came under threat. Then followed the bomb scare in the Dhaka University science complex, a number of educational institutions in Sylhet and Sylhet radio station.

It would be too simplistic to be dismissive about these being mischief-mongers' pranks, empty threats or plain hoaxes. Are these the handiwork of isolated individuals and groups looking for kicks and excitement? Or they are an organised part of a network with a mission to destabilise society, paralyse economic and service related activities and cash in on the confrontational politics in the country?

Whichever way we look at it, one thing is certain: law and order concerns in Bangladesh can no longer be treated as routine matters. The circumstances are extraordinary and these call for special counter-measures.

The motivation behind the threats can well be to test the preparedness reflexes of the government, or the response time they take to react to any simulated alarm situation. By reading into the government's reaction pattern they hope to sharpen their strategy for actual destabilisation later in the day.

The dispersal or redeployment of forces entailed is the direct consequence of threat calls. This is a way of testing the strength and resilience of the government to face up to different challenges simultaneously.

At least, they have succeeded in distracting the police and the RAB away from their other tasks to some extent. This has dual implication: on the one hand, the services tend to suffer at the threatened installations, and on the other, ordinary criminals and other hoodlums have a freer rein.

The bottomline is: we must not proceed on the notion that the threats are hoaxes; on the contrary, what they actually imply does call for a more serious strategy to counter them.

Meanwhile, why not get an anonymous telephone identification mechanism fully in place?

**Not looking up to govt, NGOs***That's the spirit, the strength*

If there is any gain from this year's floods it is unquestionably the capacity for self-help among the affected people demonstrated on a scale not hitherto witnessed.

Bangladesh people's resilience tested through one catastrophe to another in their chequered history has acquired almost a proverbial recognition abroad. It is a kind of self-eulogy perhaps that we shouldn't hesitate to indulge in once in a while. For, here is a matter of not certification by anybody but an expression of admiration for the invincibility of the human spirit against daunting odds.

The flood affected people this year in several parts of the country have set examples of volunteerism and self-help. Imagine the seed-beds farmers have raised over rafts made of just about anything they could put together to float. Their sole anxiety has been to make good their losses. Mind you, many of them famished as their tiny stocks of cereals washed away; yet they persevered to have something to latch on by way of rebuilding their battered lives.

At Kulaura in Maulvibazar people from seven unions have joined hands to repair a damaged embankment. College and school students are moving sacks of freshly dug out earth from one corner of the breached embankment to another so as to reinforce it along the weak stretches.

Our kudos to Dhaka University students who have led the way for yeoman's service to be provided to the flood victims. Replication of such efforts is going on and should gather momentum as the receding waters pose another set of problems.

The floods have certainly raised the consciousness level of our people to try and fend for each other. That remains an asset for us.

**Semblance of fairness in elections at last**

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

in the country since 1991 (when parliamentary system of government was introduced). In the previous 68 by-elections, the BNP bagged 30 seats while Awami League secured 25. Jatiyo Party (Ershad) bagged six seats, Independent candidates four seats and one each went to Jatiyo Party (Manju), Islami Oikya Jote and Bokalpa Dhaka.

There were some reports of minority voter intimidation, few incidents of fake voting and turning out of polling agents in the Gazipur-2 election. However, according to most electoral

poll. In fact, the extent of measures taken by the Election Commission need to be replicated in future by-elections and also in the general elections if human resources so permit.

The nature of the Constituency itself made the poll very sensitive. There were 195 polling stations within the eight Unions and two Municipalities. Of these 96 polling stations were identified as 'most vulnerable.' The presence of a large number of industrial workers, madrasas and religious

Gazipur-2 by-poll (the 16th such poll to be held for the incumbent Eight Parliament) was seen as special.

One thing has been very clear from the vote. Young Zahid Ahsan Russell has benefited from many protest votes cast by local residents who have been shocked by the gruesome assassination of his father Ahsanullah Master, the former Member of Parliament from this Constituency. The Awami League has already called it a victory against the politics of patronising killers.

general agreement among all political parties that polling officials and Returning Officers with partisan feelings should not be present to monitor the election. The fact that the Election Commission took a strong step in this area was specially helpful.

The question that arises then is why the electoral process was allowed to go sour in the Dhaka-10 Constituency. Was it necessary to have made it so controversial and thereby deny the results the desired credibility?

The present Administration must

**POST BREAKFAST**

**What is at issue here is fairness and transparency. The Gazipur-2 election has built a bridge towards normalcy. Let the government now show its neutrality and provide the people of this Constituency with all financial assistance that will be required for post-flood rehabilitation. Let it be demonstrated that the government can rise over pettiness and help citizens despite their preference for a non-BNP candidate. This will put at rest many allegations.**

poll observers, the voting was held in a festive atmosphere without any noticeable law and order problem or rigging.

The statistics related to the poll were most interesting. Despite the presence of flood waters, there had been a 57.26 per cent turnout in this prestige poll. The AL candidate secured 55.19 percent of the votes cast as opposed to his main rival MA Mannan (from the BNP led four-party Alliance) who obtained 39.87 percent of the votes. There were eight candidates who had participated in the fray.

The by-election in Gazipur-2 constituency was the 69th such election

institutions also enhanced tension within the Constituency. As such extra care and security helped in an orderly vote despite the difficulties created by flooding.

This particular poll was a significant litmus test for the Election Commission and also for the government. Many of us were genuinely worried that a biased election in this Constituency would act as a catalyst for further deterioration in governance. The Awami League had, it may be recalled, boycotted three consecutive by-elections in three different Constituencies-Kushtia-1, Munshiganj-1 and Dhaka-10. In view of this, the participation of Awami League in the

It would also be pertinent to note here a few unusual factors that surfaced during the Gazipur election. I believe that these contributed to the success of holding the poll in a peaceful manner. Both the contenders avoided personal invectives. This was consistent with the norms of decency usually associated with elections elsewhere. Secondly, there was also "no effort" to drag in the names of Bangabandhu and General Zia into the campaign. The main focus was on the various kinds of development work that are required within the Constituency and the past performances of the respective parties. Another important factor was the

understand that democracy and democratic norms have to be seen to have been practised in any electoral process. This is the only way to consolidate democratic behaviour.

Good governance required tolerance. This is the only way to create trust. In democracy, there are no losers. Both parties, those who from the government, and those who are expected to play the role of being in the opposition, are tow sides of the same coin. In a true democracy, the ruling Administration, instead of creating new areas of discord, has to identify area of convergence, to which all parties can meaningfully contribute.

The main opposition party, the

Awami League, has its own national agenda. The Gazipur-2 by-election has reaffirmed most convincingly that the general citizens share their critical views. This has been done in a constructive manner through the ballot box.

In similar fashion, such criticism, can be, and should be, openly discussed within the Parliament. That is why we have a Parliament. Members of the opposition, most wisely, are now participating in every aspect associated with the parliamentary process. They should be given all opportunities to express their views. The current Administration has brute majority and does not need to be concerned that they will lose in a vote of confidence. They have a singular advantage where even if they lose a few by-elections, they will still retain sufficient majority to rule. They can consequently show to the people of Bangladesh and our friends around the world, that they believe in constructive democracy and not the retention of power through subterfuge or ballot rigging.

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The Gazipur-2 election has built a bridge towards normalcy. Let the government now show its neutrality and provide the people of this Constituency with all financial assistance that will be required for post-flood rehabilitation. Let it be demonstrated that the government can rise over pettiness and help citizens despite their preference for a non-BNP candidate. This will put at rest many allegations.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

**Sonia Gandhi and her message for us!**

MAJOR GENERAL (RETD) SYED MUHAMAD IBRAHIM, BP

ADY Prime Ministers have become a common matter in South Asia. But exceptions are equally attractive, and bear lessons. That encourages me to write even after three months of the event. What Sonia did, substantiates again two old sayings: first, 'politicians think of next election while statesmen think of next generation', and second, 'country and nation must get higher priority over party and party must get higher priority over individuals'. Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia were all heads of governments (or state) but declined to continue at some stage of their career. Only the uncommon can create such precedents. Lee, Mandela or Mahathir acted according to the dictates of their patriotic conscience. What Sonia Gandhi did in India in May last is a step further in exemplifying patriotic consciousness and noble sacrifice. The parliament building in New Delhi has been a witness to election of fourteen prime ministers, but the rarest is the witness to renunciation.

The attractions, the allurements and the charm of being prime minister and the wailing calls from two hundred Congress leaders inside the central hall of the parliament building could not convince Sonia to be the prime minister. As 'India Today' wrote: "What a story it has been, the story of Sonia so far. From day one of the battle for the 14th Lok Sabha, she has been the 'lady of revenge'. When she declined to be prime minister and refused to be the heroine of another dynastic coronation, Sonia had her revenge. She didn't want to gift the Sangh Parivar a permanent cause -- her national credentials." In 1996 VP Singh was the first choice after the fall of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 13-day government. He was elected the UDF leader and many Chief Ministers pleaded to him. But he vanished. Jyoti Basu agreed but his party regretted. But no renunciation or denial created so much impact as Sonia's.

The fact that Sonia Gandhi decided not to be the prime minister was known as early as May 1999. Fifteen months after she had become the president of the All India Congress (succeeding Sitaram Kesri), she was faced with a rebellion. The Congress

Central Working Committee meeting scheduled for 15th May 1999 was expected to be a brief one, where minimum time was to have been spent to finalise the list of candidates for the up-coming Goa assembly polls. Not only Sonia Gandhi, but almost every member of the CWC other than the rebels, were taken by nearly total surprise and shock when PA Sangma, Sharad Pawar and Tariq Anwar raised the issue of Sonia's foreign birth and accused her of becoming a political

Narashima Rao. They failed. Sonia silently sided with Narashima Rao. But this time in 2004, Sonia ensured two-fold amendment of the party constitution; firstly she should be able to retain the CPP leadership and secondly, the chairperson of Congress was authorised to nominate a leader to form the government. Although Sonia Gandhi became the president of the party in March 1998, it was in November 2000 only that she became the organisationally elected president of

Will the political leadership in Bangladesh have the courage, courtesy and concern to analytically study the rise of Sonia to greatness and her sacrifices? The Indian National Congress of 1991 faced very-near similarity with BNP of 1981 and Awami League of 1975. Under trying circumstances Sheikh Hasina became President of the Awami League in the early eighties, as did Khaleda Zia become Chairperson of BNP about the same time. Former President Ershad is leading the JP for last eighteen years. What are their programmes for promoting democracy within their parties? How much are they as individuals prepared to sacrifice for the party or the country?



Sonia Gandhi: Standing high on sacrifice

having a party leader acceptable to all. The top leadership desperately tried to convince Sonia Gandhi to take over the reins. She had steadfastly refused and finally indicated her preference for PV Narashima Rao. Rao became the prime minister of India within weeks, and served a full tenure.

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liability for Congress. That very day Sonia Gandhi had decided to resign from the post of party president.

In her resignation letter dated 15th May 1999, she wrote "...India is my motherland, dearer to me than my own life. I came into the service of Congress party, knowing that it is the only party capable of providing India with a stable, secular, progressive and independent government. That belief remains unshakable. I came into the service of the party not for a position or power but because the party faced a challenge to its very existence and I could not stand idly by. I do not intend to do so now.....".

The fact that, she knew inside her own soul that she won't be the prime minister, did not deter her from preparing the party for victory and responsibility in the last six years. From the days of Jawaharlal Nehru, there was a tradition that the two top posts--those of leader of the party and prime minister--were clubbed together, making Nehru, Indira and Rajiv all-powerful. In 1994, during the days of Narashima Rao as prime minister, some stalwarts like Arjun Singh tried to bring in a change with a view to curtail the powers of

the party by defeating Jitendra Prasada, the only contestant. Having become the elected president she spared little pain, to educate herself in the nuances and intricacies of high profile politics.

Sonia tried to develop a corporate culture in managing the party and brought in accountability and personal discipline among the seniors of the party. Congress under Sonia had already achieved one historic 'first' by then, that is, to approve in their own party and then support an abortive bill in the parliament to reserve one-third of parliamentary and assembly seats for women. 10 June 2001 is important in the history of parliamentary politics in India; this day Congress under Sonia pledged to accept monetary donations only through cheques--the first political party to do so in India. She ensured that party members also subscribe to the party fund regularly, to strengthen the party finance, instead of relying on donations only. Skeptics outnumbered optimists when Sonia pushed the internal reforms, but soon she was proved right. Priyanka was married to Robert Vadra in February 1997. Within months of the marriage, Sonia developed

family only to protect the integrity and transparency of the leader Sonia. All these were her efforts to prepare the party for holding office. Thus when the party was about to reap the fruits of the hard work and sacrifices, it is then that she declined to be the prime minister. Throughout the last 4 to 5 years mildly, but strongly throughout the election campaign for last 2 to 3 months, anti-Congress political parties harped on the foreigner issue regarding Sonia. They were dead against Sonia becoming the prime minister. The Indian constitution does not prohibit any naturalised citizen from becoming prime minister, but BJP and its like minded parties would give no concessions.

In May last when the election result

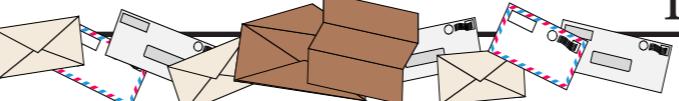
started showing that Congress was most likely to form the government, then BJP and its like-minded parties threatened extreme agitation and obstructionist programme, only to preempt Sonia becoming the prime minister. Having failed through election-propaganda, BJP resorted to vengeance. While Sonia and the Congress campaigned during the election, the voters knew for sure who was Sonia Gandhi. Therefore while the

Congress drew popular support, it was for Sonia as she were and Congress as she led. Therefore to oppose Sonia Gandhi in becoming prime minister meant opposing popular wish. BJP was exactly doing that. Sonia Gandhi had to make a choice. Should she honour the wishes of those who voted for her party or honour the wishes of those who did not vote in favour of her party. She decided to opt for the latter. She has not become prime minister, but she has ensured that Congress has a smooth run. She has not become prime minister, but she has probably laid the foundation for Rahul or Priyanka to be the prime minister in years to come.

The Indian Hindi cinema has a great following in Bangladesh, and impacts the young mind. The Hindi cinema often enact political dramas which are known for witty and critical representation of the realities. How about the real-life drama enacted by Sonia Gandhi impacting upon Bangladeshi society. Will the political leadership in Bangladesh have the courage, courtesy and concern to analytically study the rise of Sonia to greatness and her sacrifices? The Indian National Congress of 1991 faced very-near similarity with BNP of 1981 and Awami League of 1975. Under trying circumstances Sheikh Hasina became President of the Awami League in the early eighties, as did Khaleda Zia become Chairperson of BNP about the same time. Former President Ershad is leading the JP for last eighteen years. What are their programmes for promoting democracy within their parties? How much are they as individuals prepared to sacrifice for the party or the country?

We do not want to pen down our preferences; Sonia has done it for us; we can only join Mohsin Siddique of Washington DC, USA (Daily Star 26 May 2004) in asking for little more of nobility and grace. In the context of Bangladeshi leadership, 'thank God Sonia is a lady!'

Major General Ibrahim is a former Director General of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies.

**TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR****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.**

**A valuable addition**

"Scientific indications in the Holy Quran" is an excellent and timely publication, based on a research project 1985-90, suitable for the young thinking minds, that is, the present generation indoctrinated by western science, literature and methodology, based on materialism.

The new breed of macro- and micro-scientists worldwide dealing with the space above and within, chaos, and the dark matter or the universe, are stuck up for explanations, down at the hair-splitting level, and are turning to mystic literature trying for hundreds of years and trying to decode signals therein, which seems familiar to them now.

One person was missing in the research board, a Sufi or mystic, to balance the rich contributions of the scientists and religious teachers.

Also, science has progressed since the mid- and late 80s, as the members of the Board would themselves confirm. So, for the tertiary readers, some footnotes, and small-print paragraphs would be welcome.

The Islamic Foundation deserves hearty recognition and endorsement for undertaking a noble reorientation project for the present and future generations.

**Abu Abd**

*Dhaka*

**Tourist visa to earn money?**

We do not understand how, why, under what circumstances and under what authority some foreigners are entering into Bangladesh with tourist visa to earn money in our country and leaving our country with their earnings.

These foreigners who stay in hotels, guest houses and host's residences for couple of weeks earn a huge amount of money through various professions and means and go back to their own countries with their booties.

Many foreign doctors, artists, engineers, actors, actresses are reportedly engaged in such illegal activities.

It