

Bleeding politics

Leaders must rise to the occasion

THE assassination attempt on main opposition Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina on Saturday that caused widespread death and destruction is not only deplorable but a warning signal to the political parties too. By now it is certain to all of us that the neatly planned and executed, almost to perfection, bomb attacks on a peaceful rally had the sole objective of destabilising the country. It is a clear indication of political violence going out of control. The news of setting fire to a passenger train by angry supporters of the opposition in Bhairab and violent clashes in other parts of the country are an ominous indicator of mounting political tension that must be defused at any cost.

None of the successive governments were able to resolve the mysteries behind the numerous bomb blasts in public places over a long period. That must have emboldened the terrorists lurking in the darkness. The governments showed neither the political willingness nor administrative efficiency to rein in the killers with an iron fist. The failure to nab the criminals has landed us in a situation where we have been made witness to such horrendous and gory mass murder that could only be the work of hardcore terrorists. It is now obvious that no government, past and present, took the issue of terrorism as seriously as they should have. Even the latest series of bombing in different parts of the country did not sensitise the government to the need for standing up to the challenge.

The kind of carnage and casualty caused by Saturday's grenade attacks was a rare example of barbarity committed in cold blood. The time has come for the government to distinguish between routine criminality and terrorism in order to get a clearer view of the situation. All the political parties must keep it in mind that the terrorists could only jeopardise the democratic process. And that's why they all must close their ranks and unite to fight the menace of terrorism that plagues our society as a whole.

We are passing through a grave crisis. We hope our political leadership will veer the nation off the dangerous course.

Iran's response

The US should review its strategy of pre-emption

PRESIDENT Bush's idea of ensuring world peace through pre-emptive strikes against the possible sources of danger has clearly backfired. The point would be made clear by what the defence minister of Iran has said. Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani has warned that his country would attack the US forces in the Middle East, should Washington or Israel try to blow up the Iranian nuclear installation at Bushehr.

The statement follows the exchange of threats between Iran and Israel in recent weeks and has laid bare the truth that the pre-emption theory has given birth to new security concerns, particularly in the countries directly affected by the US military presence in the Middle East. Israel used it to destroy Iraqi nuclear installations in 1981, and President Bush's war on the country is actually based on the assumption that President Saddam was becoming a threat to the world at large. Neither the US nor Israel, however, had to show anything concrete to prove that their conviction was based on any tangible truth.

Now the countries, which the US deems to be potentially dangerous, have every reason to feel threatened. And Washington's handling of the Middle East situation has only served to deepen the fears. Iran and other countries in the region are particularly worried about the free-hand given to Israel by the US. And Israel has a proven record of going to any lengths to deal with perceived threats to its existence. Regrettably, its position has always been defended stubbornly by its mentor.

Tehran's nuclear plans are being viewed with great suspicion. Again, the US and Israel are working on the hypothetical premise that Iran poses a threat to world peace. However, Iran's clear response to the US-Israel position underlines the hazards associated with stretching the pre-emption theory beyond the limits of international norms.

The US, and all the advocates of pre-emptive strikes, cannot evade the question as to how their plan has changed the world. And they should also visualise the scenario in which more and more countries will be striking preemptively to crush their enemies.

Kerry's world-view and what if he is elected!



M ABDUL HAFIZ

incumbency at the party convention on July 30 in Boston it was a damper for both the Americans and a large part of international community whom he disappointed both with his style and pronouncements reflecting his world-view. With a tinge of frivolity in a mock military style Kerry, a war veteran, saluted the gathering and said that he was there at the convention "to answer

created by the US itself in large parts of the world under control. Consequent upon the US' presidential election would the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan be brought to an end? The prospects do not seem exactly encouraging.

While President Bush fails to realise that his war against Taliban in Afghanistan and against Saddam Hussain in Iraq had turned out to be an

Kerry said in the party convention suggested that he was not against the war purse -- even if he disagrees with the method of conducting it. He was proud of having volunteered himself to serve in Vietnam -- the US' largest imperialist war of twentieth century.

He also acknowledged that he had a sense of pride and an excitement when he heard the "stars and stripes forever"

becomes president of the US he would build a strong US military and add 40,000 active duty troops to strengthen American forces that are now overstretched, overextended and under pressure and would double the special forces to conduct anti-terrorist operation. John Kerry claimed that "after decades of experience in National Security he knew the reach of Ameri-

have been naive in defining the rationale for his going to war both in Afghanistan and Iraq but a considerable section of Americans did not and perhaps still do not believe that the wars were totally unjustified -- the full house screaming of "Fahrenheit 9/11" notwithstanding. Clearly the world-views of the two contenders are tied neck and neck. John Kerry publicly known to be proved of winning wars is certain to be adamant about winning the war on terror. He will rather adopt a still more hard line in this regard

PERSPECTIVES

Bush might have been naive in defining the rationale for his going to war both in Afghanistan and Iraq but a considerable section of Americans did not and perhaps still do not believe that the wars were totally unjustified -- the full house screaming of "Fahrenheit 9/11" notwithstanding. Clearly the world-views of the two contenders are tied neck and neck. John Kerry publicly known to be proved of winning wars is certain to be adamant about winning the war on terror. He will rather adopt a still more hard line in this regard

the call to service" just as he had done when he volunteered for service in Vietnam -- immediately conjuring up the spectre of an unsavoury war before an war-weary audience.

However, in three months' time it would be clear whether Kerry was actually a bit too frivolous or whether he can be trusted with the destiny of the people in the US and in many other parts of the world. What matters most is whether he can bring the tumult

exercise in futility John Kerry is no less tempted to chase the mirage. Despite disclosures of Senate Intelligence Committee which establishes that his (Bush) suspicions about the presence of the weapons of mass destruction was altogether baseless, President Bush is adamant that his going to war against Iraq had been fully justified -- and so had been his war also against Afghanistan.

Indeed a great deal of what John

(the US' military anthem) being played by an American band on a military train in Germany. He said that he learnt what it meant to be America at its best. He paid tribute to the generation that belonged to his forefathers for making America strong, for winning the World War II and then winning the cold war.

In his address at the democratic convention in the chilling part of it Kerry also made it known that if he

can power and the power of America ideals. Kerry who shares the American sense of power also promised to keep the most dangerous weapons in the world out of the most dangerous hands of the world" -- a constant refrain of the neo-con ideologues.

President Bush may not have used such sophisticated language but aren't all these what he was trying to convey in his own simplistic, unembellished and rather brazen way? Bush might

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Everybody loves a good deluge

NAZRUL ISLAM

A NY natural disaster like this year's deluge is definitely a curse for common people. But such a disaster is also a boon for many people in our country. It is unfortunate but true.

This year's flooding of course wrought havoc in many parts of Bangladesh. I have no intention to belittle the magnitude of the destruction. But what is interesting is the controversy that has arisen over the loss caused by the flooding. The damage figure provided by various government departments and ministries seemed to be tentative and inflated and the independent think tank Centre for Policy Dialogue opened the Pandora's Box, creating uproar in the civil society.

The flood this year struck Bangladesh in the first week of July and affected northeastern, northern, and southern parts of the country. The government did nothing except allocating a meagre quantity of relief materials up to July 25 despite huge outcry in the independent media. The state-run television did not show any clips on flooding. Their news mainly concentrated on allocation of relief materials, which I already mentioned was small in quantity. The entire government machinery remained mum on the

flooding and even a minister dubbed the pictures showed on the TV channels and published in newspapers as manufactured.

As the floodwater entered into the capital city, the government high-ups suddenly woke up and the Prime Minister for the first time on July 25

that is only the start. During the last two weeks, various ministries and departments arranged press briefings, spoke to reporters, and issued press releases to publicise the loss incurred in their respective departments and ministries.

The latest government figure of flood damage stands at \$7 billion. The

ment, but sitting in the office. Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman also perceived the sinister motive of the bureaucrats involved in the preparation of the damage figure and he termed the figure as trash.

There are obvious reasons for inflating the figure of the damage by the

The damage figure of Aus paddy surprised me. As an agriculturist and a member of a peasant family, so far as my knowledge goes, harvesting of Aus paddy finished in June. Moreover, during my several visits to the northern districts by road in the months of June and July (peak flooding period), I did

seedlings. And embezzlement of relief materials is a common practice in our country. A close friend of mine who is a UP chairman in a northern district told me that they (chairmen) have to pay 20-25 per cent of the VGF allocation in cash to the TNO and district officials in advance.

Bangladesh has received about \$40 billion as aid and grants since independence. A study by a renowned economist shows that only 25 per cent of the aid reached to the poor targeted people. The well-off people took away the remainder by various means, including embezzlement.

In each and every occasion of natural disaster we extend our hands to the international community. Begging in all norms is a disgraceful and hated thing. It taints the image of the entire nation. But in reality, our common people are not beggars. The alms brought in their names also do not reach to them. Will there be any different story this year?

Nazrul Islam is a journalist and environmentalist.

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Unequal bargain at WTO



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

As environment minister in the 1990s, Mr Kamal Nath inspired no confidence. He stood accused of diverting River Beas in Himachal to enhance the value of a nearby hotel, in which he had an interest!

So it's not unreasonable to discount his current claim as commerce minister that developing countries (DCs) made impressive gains in the recent Framework Agreement of the World Trade Organisation, which will help them in the tough future negotiations.

Analysis shows that for a majority of DCs, the balance-sheets is red, not black. A minority of DCs from the relatively advanced G-20 group may make modest gains. But the overall cost will be extremely damaging for the Third World.

True, the Framework Agreement has

some components that favour the 1.3 billion Third World people who represent 96 percent of the globe's farmers. Under it, rich countries must abolish export subsidies, and reduce unwarranted support to their farmers by 20 percent in the first year, and eventually cap trade-distorting (or Blue Box) subsidies to 5 percent of the production value.

DCs get some leeway in tariff reduction. They can temporarily designate

agricultural market access" (NAMA). Put simply, DCs must greatly reduce import duties on Northern industrial goods -- even if that produces job losses and destroys nascent industries.

DCs must accord "national treatment" to Northern services multinationals -- on a par with domestic firms. "Services" will eventually include electricity generation, water, even education!

The bargain is clear: for modest gains in agricultural exports, the South must

government officials. If the inflated figure is established, more allocation would come, and more allocation means more pillage. Nothing is impossible for our bureaucrats, technocrats, and their political cronies -- they can dig a pond, fill it, and make it plain land on paper without doing anything. Another thing that works is inflating the damage figure -- if you want a canon, you may expect at least a pistol.

I noticed such arbitrary figure in a news report. Agriculture Ministry officials told Daily Jugantar that standing crops on nearly 8 lakh hectares of land was damaged in the flooding. Of them 2.3 lakh hectares were Aus paddy.

not see any Aus paddy remained uncultivated in the field. The damage in the agriculture might be greater than mentioned in the report, but the way the officials are presenting it is causing damage to the entire nation.

Are the relief materials properly reaching the target population? A Prothom Alo report says that in Kurigram, out of 53 beneficiaries 43 were from a relation of a minister and they are from affluent families. This is a single example of misplacement of relief materials. During my recent visit to the northern districts, many people alleged of politicising the distribution of relief materials, seed and Aman

subsidies may not mean much. Prof C.P. Chandrashekhar of JNU shows the European Union need make no reduction in subsidies provided it can juggle around with the Blue and Green Boxes.

These are, respectively, lists of trade-distorting subsidies, and permissible farmer support.

The Agreement allows expansion of the Blue Box. At Cancun, an attempt to enlarge it was unanimously rejected by DCs. The talks collapsed.

The Geneva agreement won't alter

According to Focus, the rich first failed to split the G-20 through a frontal assault.

But soon, they used wily tactics: "For instance, to get its new expanded Blue Box, Washington distracted the DCs' attention by [demanding] that they reduce their [minimal acceptable] domestic support. Thrown on the defensive, these countries spent much energy justifying their subsidies ... they were only too relieved when the US ... [compromised] ... in return for their agreeing" to expanding the Blue Box.

By contrast, most DCs have few exports to defend.

India and Brazil also aspire to export low-value-added services (carpenters, plumbers, nurses, etc.), which most DCs can't. The US-EU managed to drive a wedge between the two groups.

India and Brazil now cannot claim to lead the South, itself heterogeneous. In fact, even the safeguards to defend farmers' interests were proposed by the G-90, not them!

These provisions may not help much. For instance, India produces some 250 crops; the EU only 20-25. The EU could temporarily designate, say, 7 or 8 as "sensitive." But even in a bad year, India won't be allowed to put 70 or 90 crops into the "special" and "safeguard" boxes.

In the long run, the Geneva Agreement will harm DCs -- like the Uruguay Round agreement on trade-related intellectual property rights, which creates monopolistic patents.

To say this is *not* to play the BJP's tune. That party has a narrow, parochial motivated criticism of the Agreement, focused on the expansion of Blue Box, rather than on the vital issue of NAMA and privatisation of services.

There's a lesson here. As free-market economist Jagdish Bhagwati admits, you can either have free trade or fair trade, not both. For us citizens, fair trade is a priority. For the Geneva accord, it isn't.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

OPINION

'Have we got no decency left?'

MD. FIROJ ALAM

I have read the article of Mohammad Badrul Ahsan published under the above caption in the Daily Star on August 13, 2004. I would like to thank Mr Ahsan for focusing on a very significant, and at the same time a very different, aspect related to the current flood. Like him I was also burning within with the same kind of agony: while more than 30 million of our people are passing their days through utter suffering, we are living our life as if nothing has happened.

I feel that our attitude to the flood affected people have not only crossed the limit of decency, but sometimes it

has also crossed the limit of humanity. I worried that we have lost our strong fellow feeling attitude -- one of our big capitals that we have been using from the past to recover the nation from worst situations. I can still remember how people had responded on the cyclone of 1991 that ravaged the coastal belt. People had not waited for the instruction of the government or any relief agencies. The cyclone hit at night on 29th April, and the next morning many volunteers, students and general people rushed to the affected areas and stood by the suffering people with whatever they had. I was involved with relief work during the 1988 flood and have seen the most critical days in their lives. The shop-

ping malls, fast food shops, recreation centres, the streets and lanes, all as normal as they were before the flood. Mr. Badrul Ahsan got shocked seeing the opening ceremony of the Basundhara shopping malls amid this flood situation. Not only that, many more odd things have happened and is still happening that can not help shaking the sensitive people. BTV has demonstrated its lack of empathy for the flood victims. It has been relaying the recent cricket matches for hours after hours from Sri Lanka. When thousands of our people are just struggling to remain alive, a section of people are watching the cricket matches and shouting on the fours, sixes and wicket falling. Indecency too

has it's a limit. I have really got shocked when BTV was also busy in showing directly the nationwide competition of Nitol-Tata football matches. The thousands of football fans in the stadium simply reminded me that the country is divided into two with different identities -- one is flood affected and another one flood unaffected. The second one has nothing to do for the first one other than reading the flood report in newspapers, or watching it on TV as it is happening in a distant country. There is no dearth of examples of responding on disasters forgetting boundaries, friends and foes. Recently, to help the earthquake victims in an Iranian town, the US has forgotten the old enemy and come to

help Iran. More recently South Korea rushed to North Korea to rescue the people who were affected in a tragic railway accident. They have prioritised humanity, not politics. But we incidentally remained firmly divided on our previous differences and could not cross the limit of the parochial self-interest even at the time of this national disaster. This time too, people from many countries of the world are responding to help the flood affected people. But have we done our best for our own people?

A group of opportunists have flooded the market with adulterated ORS. Where our inhumanity have reached! Who knows how many people have died or suffered taking

this adulterated saline? A woman in Gaibanda was describing that a young man was struck by diarrhoea in the evening and passed away in the early next morning. Since then a fork is poking my mind: was the boy served with the adulterated ORS? Some of my colleagues working with a national NGO were complaining that a distribution company was demanding higher rate for the water purification tablet. Newspapers also published the report of misappropriating relief goods. Shamefully, we had to witness the subversive activities like cutting the dam in Dhunot to let the flood water enter and wash away a few hundred people with their belongings. I do not know what I shall call it. Is it

indecent or simply inhumanity,