

Interpol at last

International assistance long overdue

THAT Interpol has offered assistance to the government in its investigation into last Saturday's grenade attack on the AL rally that killed 19 and injured over 200, and that the government has welcomed such assistance, is the best news we have heard in the last few days.

The simple truth of the matter is that the government and the law enforcement agencies under its control do not command the resources and expertise necessary to tackle such a major investigation on their own, and international assistance in such matters is long overdue.

It has long been this newspaper's editorial policy that the government should seek outside assistance to deal with the escalating security threat in the country. The government should have sought outside assistance long before in cases such as the massive arms haul in Chittagong earlier this year, and the fact that it has finally -- albeit belatedly -- accepted the reality that it needs help and that there is no shame in asking for it, comes as a welcome relief.

Indeed, the international nature of the security threats that the nation faces from groups that very likely have links outside the country and most definitely receive their deadly weaponry from abroad makes the cooperation of Interpol not only useful, but absolutely imperative.

Of course, while we welcome international assistance and also applaud the government's apparent endorsement of the benefits of such assistance, there can be no question of such reliance being anything more than a temporary measure, and no question that the government must urgently turn its attention to building the investigative capacity necessary to handle such crises itself.

The news that the CID utterly lacks the forensic capacity to investigate the recent attack with anything like the thoroughness and expertise that is necessary comes as something of a shock, and must be rectified forthwith. That the domestic law enforcement agencies must possess the manpower, training, and equipment needed to investigate threats to the nation's security is an urgent necessity.

Ultimately, a fully trained and equipped police force would not only be able to get to the bottom of acts of terrorism such as last Saturday's, but would also go a long way to preventing such atrocities before they occur in the first place. Resources must be allocated to this -- we can no longer afford to spare any expense to protect our national security.

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End of Najaff standoff

We hope the truce lasts

THE three-week long standoff in Najaff has come to an end extracting a very heavy price from Iraqis. After several hundred deaths, many more than number injured and a large number of human displacements, the combatants, i.e. the occupation forces backed by the Iraqi security elements and the Mahdi army have agreed to a truce.

The three-week long standoff demonstrates several things. While it exposes the weakness of both the Interim Authority as well as the occupation forces, it demonstrates that mere force can do very little to solve a problem that remains the fundamental and core issue of the entire imbroglio, which is the end of occupation of Iraq. It also demonstrates the interim authority's tenuous control of the overall politico-military situation in Iraq.

That, a religious cleric, convalescing after a heart operation, had to be called upon to strike a peace deal with what the occupation army considers a rebel force, speaks volumes about the interim authority's lack of clout in resolving vexing political issues on their own.

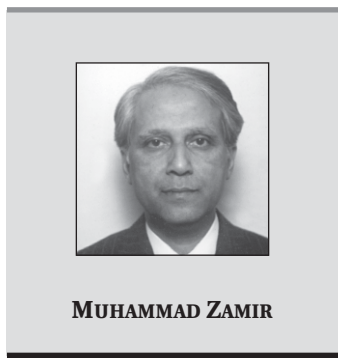
We are happy to note that the initiative of the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and his peace plans have borne fruit in that both Mahdi-al-Sadr and the interim government support the deal. Given that both the Ayatollah and Mahdi-al-Sadr view each other with suspicion, the deal brings some hope for peace in the area.

In fact Baghdad, Sadr City, Najaff, Samara, Baquba, Kufa etc are but the manifestations of the deep resentment of the common Iraqis against the continued and illegal occupation of their country. It is also a reaction to the promised peace and freedom that has remained elusive.

The Interim Government will do well to remember that Sadr and his Mahdi Army enjoy support at the grassroots in many parts of Iraq, particularly Shia Iraq. It would be wrong to see the Mahdi Army as a transient phenomenon, led by one who has the pretension but not the substance of power.

Mr. Sadr should be persuaded to join the democratic process, but such persuasion should not cause the wanton death and destruction of Iraqi civilians. We only hope the truce lasts.

Bay of Bengal initiative for multi-sector cooperation



INITIATED in 1997, the regional grouping of States bordering the Bay of Bengal has grown not only in terms of number but also in scope and potential. It started off with Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka but have now welcomed within its fold Bhutan and Nepal.

The latest meeting of this regional grouping, held in Bangkok at the end of July at the Summit level, also decided to rename itself from BIMST-EC to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sector Technical and Economic Cooperation. I understand that the acronym will remain the same but the hyphen before EC will be dropped.

This compromise was apparently adopted to avoid making the acronym more difficult now that Nepal and Bhutan are also members.

The very fact that such a meeting could be convened and meaningful discussion held will enhance the status of this effort. It will also help to dispel comments from many analysts who had been doubtful about its long-term economic prospects and suggested that any decision making would be painfully slow.

It is true that the gathering at this point of time is big on symbolism and that actual trade between the participating countries is still very small. In fact, trade within the group represents only US Dollars 7.3 billion,

or about 4 per cent of their total trade. Final tariff negotiations on all items are also still not over within the Group. It is also correct that the Group suffers from not having Singapore and Malaysia, the two other regional power-houses on board. Nevertheless all great undertakings start with small steps and having this Summit meeting has been one of them.

The various measures outlined in the Joint Declaration, issued after the Summit meeting, identify desired

suitable mechanism so deemed fit. This will enhance professionalism within the Group.

It is understood that BIMSTEC will focus on specific areas of cooperation, including trade and investment, transport and communication, tourism, energy, human resources development, agriculture, fisheries, science and technology and people to people contact. It has also been anticipated that future cooperation within this Group will require

itself various sub-regional measures of cooperation. For example, the decision to open direct road link between Bangladesh and Yunan, province of China, via Myanmar could be integrated within future projects to be undertaken by BIMSTEC.

Bangladesh has been playing an important role since the inception of this Grouping during the Awami League Administration. In this context, it will obviously be significant for us to continue being supportive of

to avoid wastage of time and resources.

Some of the above areas of possible cooperation have assumed special significance for Bangladesh. It has to protect its vital interests and its coastal economic zone as a littoral state on the Bay of Bengal. It will also require investment to fully exploit its potential. BIMSTEC can be most useful in this regard.

Similar, Bangladesh, along with the other Members will have to take a hard look at energy development and

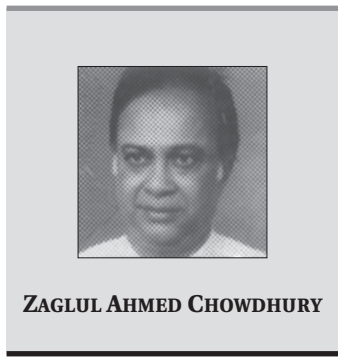
Summit meeting has been the unanimous agreement to combat international terrorism. It was most interesting to note that all the countries pledged not to allow use of their respective territories by terrorist groups to launch attacks on friendly governments. It might be pertinent for the Group to form a Committee, as soon as possible, composed of representatives from their respective intelligence and security agencies who could sit on a regular basis and share information about potential terrorist activities and transnational crimes. If necessary, this Committee (or Joint Working Group) could also prepare common training programmes that would assist in intelligence gathering. This would be a sensitive area of cooperation, but given confidentiality and trust, could eventually be a success, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been right in pointing out in this regard that security and state of law and order were important factors for creating basic conditions for economic development and for providing a better life for people in the region. This would also be a good confidence building measure that will reduce distrust.

The Summit meeting has also taken a few other good decisions -- facilitating freer travel among business persons, establishment of a BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce and promoting tourism through a long-term plan of action.

Bangladesh can and should benefit from such measures. Thailand and India have both forged forward and Sri Lanka is not far behind them. Bangladesh also has to do the same. We should complete the steps required for implementing the Free Trade Area stipulations and then participate interactively with the other Members to boost economic cooperation.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

How secure are political leaders in South Asia?



THE South Asian region is probably the most vulnerable for security of the political leaders. True, political leaders or important personalities -- no matter whether in power or not -- are highly insecure in many countries because of manifold obvious reasons but the record of assassinations or attempts on lives of the political figures or for that matter other form of political violence in the countries of this part of the world clearly surpasses all others. And this sordid saga is not a new phenomenon but can be traced several decades back when the pattern began amidst confrontational approach and continues unabated. In fact, the tendency towards mayhem and violence has grown in intensity turning the situation from bad to worse.

South Asia is prone to political violence and it is yet another negative factor why international world focuses its eye in this area. Certainly, countries of the region have their achievements in different fields at varying scales but there should be no denying that it is mostly the negative news that dominates regional affairs in the outside world. The recent violence at the political rally of the main opposition party in the capital of Bangladesh leading to the death of 20 persons including a prominent woman politician and injuries to 200 have once again brought to the fore the question of security of the politicians as well as vulnerability of the political climate.

This kind of mayhem is not very new in Bangladesh and have taken place in different times of successive governments. But the extent of violence this time is simply horrifying considering the degree of deaths and injuries and no wonder that the news was a major item for international electronic and print media. Terrorism related to politics in this region is a matter of great concern for the outside world on two counts. While inter-state political tensions and hostilities

escaped death.

In most cases the real source of violence and terrorism remained unknown and planners and executors beyond reach. Whether Oswald was the actual killer of Kennedy and if so, on whose behalf he acted and why Jack Ruby killed Oswald in quick time -- all these pertinent questions have not been adequately answered till now. Instances of important figures being eliminated through violent methods are not uncommon in the West and not

unfortunately all the major countries of the region have not been spared from such deadly instances. In India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh top leaders have been eliminated through violent methods both while being at the zenith of power or not in power in bizzare fashion.

In small but picturesque Himalayan kingdom of Nepal, only a couple of years ago the mainstream royal family including the King and Queen were wiped out in a palace massacre which

Kashmir, insurgency in northeastern Indian region, presence of different militant religious groups in both India and Pakistan, civil war involving the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Maoist insurgency in Nepal, existence of militant groups in Myanmar and hostile outfits along its border with Thailand and last but not the least sharp confrontational politics in Bangladesh and the destructive ways to take on the opponents have made the region internally volatile in varying degrees.

MATTERS AROUND US

Orchestrated condemnation and exhortion for tolerance must follow in a determined manner from all, cutting across differences and divides. The enormity of latest Bangladesh violence has stunned all. Should the key players involved in the broad spectrum of politics fail to accomplish something -- not much tangible is expected taking into account the hard realities albeit -- and the culprits are not brought to book -- the overall condition would remain a helpless fait accompli !

evidently form a great source of anxiety, the internal situation in countries of this region definitely often spawns enormous concern that leaves many extremely perturbed.

Admittedly, violence surrounding the political leaders -- regardless of being in power or in opposition -- and intra-party and even inter-party acrimony involving different forces stemming from rivalry for power and other types of ascendancy is a global menace that mostly engulfs the democratic countries where free expressions are permitted. The advanced democracies and developed nations are not immune to this unhealthy milieu howsoever deplorable it is. A popular president like John F Kennedy of world's most powerful country fell to the bullets of assassins while at the height of his success and civil rights leader Martin Luther King (Jr) died from shots when he had virtually no state security. Ronald Reagan as president narrowly

still remains largely shrouded in mystery. In Pakistan, the president, who is also the chief of the army, escaped two assassination bids in quick succession rather miraculously despite maximum security when his security personnel and others were killed. The incoming prime minister also survived attempt on his life. All these point to the simple fact that the tendency to wipe out key figures is not on the wane but has increased in recent times in South Asia.

The use of modern and sophisticated devices in the methods is often a matter of discussions and analyses with the main question centering on the source of such weapons and materials. It may appear that such things are not too difficult for procurement because of the location of the South Asia and the conditions prevailing here and in the neighbourhood.

The past and present situation in Afghanistan, continuing unrest in

This condition has made weapons easily available which are otherwise difficult for procurement. Hence, large catches of arms is not uncommon here but in most cases the perpetrators manage safe passage.

Politically divergent groups, interested quarters seeking to gain various form of domination, settling scores of enmity, factors relating to international and regional interests as well as some other issues can be attributed to this dangerous situation in the South Asian region. Here, leaders in power resort to maximum security compared to many other countries and those not in power also have to depend on bullet-proof vehicles and elite forces for safety. Arguably, this is a requirement but here the measures are much more than normal parameter.

Interestingly, the situation in the neighbouring southeast Asian region is not that bad. Going by the records, much lesser number of political killings or violence take place in these

countries. Indonesia, the largest country in that region saw an abortive coup in 1965 resulting in the death of many people including second-front leaders but president Sukarno was safe. However, the developments led to his disappearance from power and much later he died a normal death. In the Philippines, opposition leader Aquino was killed on his return to home from abroad during the autocratic period of Marcos and his wife Corazon later swept to power riding the crest of popularity caused by husband's assassination. There can be some other instances including in Republic of Korea but certainly much less than in South Asia.

It seems that there is hardly any chance of any let-up to this hazardous situation in this region which not only brings the politicians into the realm of vulnerability but is also susceptible for others like the mediamen. Sadly, the vicious cycle continues much to the dismay and horror of the people. It severely affects the political, social and economic fabric of a nation and in the process seeks to reverse whatever progress has been made not only in the developmental arena but in the quest towards political and overall advancement. Tolerance and sophistication must be brought into play to improve the situation. Then once again this appears an unlikely expectation. Yet, orchestrated condemnation and exhortion for tolerance must follow in a determined manner from all, cutting across differences and divides. The enormity of latest Bangladesh violence has stunned all. Should the key players involved in the broad spectrum of politics fail to accomplish something -- not much tangible is expected taking into account the hard realities albeit -- and the culprits are not brought to book -- the overall condition would remain a helpless fait accompli !

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

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.

Similar humans!

I read in Bill Clinton's book that all human beings (over six billion) are genetically the same to the extent of 99.9 per cent. It is the difference of 0.1 per cent (one in every thousand) that is causing all the trouble in civilizations and societies, as politics, economics, sociology, and religion bear witness.

As a Bangladeshi, I wonder how this one-tenth of one percent difference of opinion is holding this nation from taking off, just because Sk. Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia cannot reach a consensus on issues at the national level!

Our micro world is in trouble, and defying macro efforts at reconciliation. It sounds silly that such a microscopic difference makes all the difference in the rise of a nation or changing civilizations. The implications are beyond grasp. I give up.

AZ, Dhaka

Dr Azad's demise

Humayun Azad is no more among us. He passed away on 12 August in Germany where he had reportedly gone on a scholarship of one year for higher studies. He had been the talk of the country after the dedicated linguist and forthright writer came under the diabolic blitz from some miscreants. When he was convalescing, he was often threatened by the attackers.

Probably finding his country unsafe to live in, he very covertly went to Germany where he breathed his last. But his sudden and unexpected demise has spawned a lot of doubts whether it is a natural death or some defeated hands have masterminded it, though the primary medical report has quashed all the doubts and skepticism about anything unnatural.

ABM Shafiqul Islam
Jahangirnagar University

Subjugating NGOs

Since BNP's coming to power, the party is very much up and doing in bringing NGOs of the country under its direct control. The motive behind this move could be to gain indirect access to the huge funds of NGOs.

To achieve the goal, the government is proceeding very aggressively. First, it weakened the association of the NGOs, ADAB by creating a parallel association. This they achieved by applying the stick and carrot method on some NGOs. Second, to cripple some NGOs they withheld release of their funds which the NGOs receive as donation from different countries/agencies. Third, the government has formulated a policy by which they can directly intervene in the day-to-day activities of NGOs, change CEO, appoint a government administrator to act as CEO etc. This move of the government has raised concern amongst the general public, NGOs and country's development partners. To force the NGOs into subjugation, the coalition government has adopted coercive measures. Like, bringing sedition and corruption charges against the CEO of a very prominent NGO. The state power has been applied to harass Dr Qazi Faruk Ahmed. The government wants to show to other NGOs, what fate awaits them if they do not submit to its desire.

We are afraid if the BNP, or for that matter any political party, succeeds in its plan of gaining direct control of NGOs, NGOs of the country will be reduced to a government apparatus--highly corrupt and highly inefficient. For the greater interest of the huge mass of the poor, the uneducated, the socially disadvantaged, all concerned must unite amongst them and resist the move of the government. NGOs must not give in to the carrot and stick policy of any political party.

A concerned citizen
Dhaka

Indigenous people-strangers in their homeland

The indigenous people of Bangladesh are facing exploitation, deprivation and torment. Forest and land are the life line of ethnic people. But the trees of jungle are being chopped recklessly, there is a plan to wipe out the indigenous people. The indigenous people are losing their land due to the conspiracy hatched by an influential group. No steps are being taken to protect and preserve the indigenous culture and lifestyle. The rights of the indigenous people have to be protected as they are guaranteed by the law of the land.

Jeffraj Dolon Kubi
Ex Organisational Secretary (Central Committee)
Bangladesh Garo Chhatra Songgothan (Bangladesh)
Shariatpur

A day to remember

August 21, 2004 will be observed in the history of Bangladesh as the day on which an attempt was made to gag people's freedom of speech. .This day will become another Ekushey to the freedom loving people of this country. On this day, powerful grenades were charged to eliminate the former prime minister and the present leader of the opposition of Bangladesh parliament along with his party high ups. Eighteen people were killed and 400 injured an unprecedented massacre in the history of the country.

This is a big conspiracy to gag the voice of the people and civil society. The attackers like to see the nation as a country of barbarians, looters, cheaters sometimes in the name of religion and frequently in the name of politics. The heritage and culture of Bangladesh is really at stake.

Annapurna Nath
Dhaka

Death of Dr. Humayun Azad

The death of eminent writer Dr. Humayun Azad in an alien country like Germany and that too in doubtful circumstances is surely to be regretted. However, I fail to understand why a weak and sick person like him would go alone on a year long scholarship to a country where you have to physically do all your works including food preparation, washing and other daily works. How and why he was allowed to go alone? Even a young man not used to the European climate and life style becomes sick! If it was his dream assignment and he did not want to miss it, he should have taken his wife with him who could comfortably look after him or at least if he was destined to die at that moment, she should have rendered help and become a witness to his death. Whatever be the reason, we have lost a great literary figure for a simple reason of letting him go to Germany without any companion or assistant.

Mohammed Alauddin, Dhaka