

Hartal again, why?

Continuous strike in educational institutions must cease

THE Jubo and the Mohila Awami League have called another dawn to dusk hartal today -- the fourth hartal in the wake of the heinous attack of the 21st. But why?

The nation grieved with the Awami League and expressed spontaneously its resentment and consternation through the two-day hartal on the 24 and 25 August. The two hartals have not only demonstrated public anger at the bomb blast, but, hopefully, also conveyed to the government that the onus of catching the terrorists rests squarely on its shoulders. If hartal is a tool of ventilating one's grievances and conveying a message to the government, the Awami League has done that adequately, and with the full participation of the people.

Thus, the logic of calling another hartal soon after the two-day stoppage is lost on us.

Indefinite strike has also been called at all educational institutions. We cannot but express our concern at its fallout on the students. Coming in the wake of the recent floods, prolonged break due to indefinite strike will grievously hurt the students. The fact that the elementary schools are being forced to close under duress should be a cause for misgiving. This goes against the pledge of the political parties to keep educational institutions outside the scope of hartal. If student politics there must be, it should be confined to the university level, this is our firm belief.

Today's hartal also coincides with the proposed BNP rally to protest the 21 August incident. One would not be wrong to view this as an attempt by the Awami League to deliberately seek a confrontation with BNP. This is injudicious to say the least and will only exacerbate the already tense situation.

We feel that frequent hartal will not only dilute the gravity of the brutal grenade assault, there is a good chance that this will deflect our attention from it.

Nothing should be done at this moment that would further the cause of the perpetrators.

Attacks on the minorities

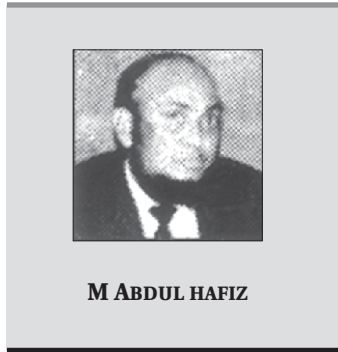
Government cannot afford to take the issue lightly any more

THE disturbing news of the attacks on six Hindu families by armed mobsters in a remote village of Rangpur last Monday has drawn our attention for two reasons. Firstly it, most alarmingly, reminds us the vulnerability of the minority community in the country; and secondly it clearly tells us about the intolerance that has crept into our society. The attack was carried out allegedly by a big group of armed people who are activists of the ruling BNP. They torched twenty two houses belonging to the Hindus destroying them completely, injured many villagers and looted cash, crops and cattle, according to reports from the area. And they could carry out such vicious attack on unsuspecting people, probably because they knew the hands of the law were not that long, at least for them.

If we try to delve deep into the actual cause behind the attack, we would discover that it wasn't just a case of causing panic and fear. The real intention, according to reports, was to evict the families and grab their lands illegally. And that's why we feel the government has failed to protect the lawful rights of the minorities. It is the duty, both moral and bounden, of the government to not only protect the interests of the minorities, but also make them feel safe and secure in similar situations. But it is rather difficult to expect safe environments for the minorities to prevail when it is the ruling party activists who are allegedly responsible for the attacks. If the government cannot rein in its own activists at the grass-roots level, things are not likely to change at all.

In fact the government must realise that such incidents only project an impression of the majority population being intolerant and hostile towards the minorities. Our Constitution guarantees the fundamental rights of all citizens irrespective of their religion, race, caste and creed. We have been witnessing with grave concern that not just the Hindus, other minorities have also been victims of repeated aggression by the majority in recent times. The government must not waste any more time and take stern actions against those who are carrying out these acts, to ensure social and communal harmony.

The making of a Frankenstein



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE terror, when combined with religious fanaticism becomes a trendy brew and lethally intoxicating. The Americans introduced the brand to Afghan Mujahideens fighting the Soviet occupation. During the eighties Pakistan's Ziaul Huq made use of militant Islam to create his support base among the clerics and tighten his grip on power. When both attempts turned into their Frankenstein they rued the creation of a monster that was about to devour them. It could not be tamed either with the US' hightech war on terror or with General Musharraf's mantra of 'enlightened moderation'.

In Bangladesh, there is no evidence of the authority directly sponsoring terrorism, but through numerous acts of omission and commission it created a

milieu where tragic dramas like one on the black Saturday could easily be enacted. After a series of bomb blasts across the country for last couple of years the fingers already started pointing at the fundamentalist elements of the ruling coalition for their possible complicity in the crimes. These pseudo custodians of Islam who opposed the independence of the country have since been striking at the root of the nation's

fundamentalists' rapidly growing power the government's authority was relegated into irrelevance. It was in that vacuum that the fundamentalists bared their fangs and later struck with some precision.

Surprisingly it is the same government which is known for its relentless repression of the political opponents with unusual promptness. Its cops

conjecture when and how will the monster turn against whom, but the full blast of its fury was witnessed in the gory afternoon of August 21 last when AL staged a peaceful protest rally to denounce the countrywide bomb terror in Bangabandhu Avenue. The carnage ominously reminded us of the continuation of the process that started in the fateful night of 15 August twenty-nine years ago. The criminals are hell bent to

democracy, tolerance, dissent and decency are squarely facing the forces of reaction and obscurantism. In this struggle against the evil and ugly we cannot afford to lose lest we are trivialised as a nation and shackled afresh by those who trade in the name of religion and use terror as their weapon.

The black Saturday has defiled our history and desecrated the soul of our

PERSPECTIVES
The twenty-first August is a watershed in the history of our nation. It wasn't a blow only to Awami League whose leadership is substantially eliminated and maimed. There is little, for the ruling alliance, to draw pleasure or complacency from the AL's predicament. All other mainstream political outfits are likely to have their turn. The force that has perhaps been inadvertently nourished and promoted by the ruling class is certainly not the latter's friend.

value system and trying to liquidate all who uphold it. Of late, when there were wide-scale reports in the press of clandestine Jihadi outfits, their training, arms catche and brushes with the law enforcing agencies the government reaction was one of non-chalance. As the media became louder with their reports of the brutality of these elements -- particularly of Bangla Bhai outfits -- there has again been an enigmatic inaction or inability to act. With the

unable to provide public safety and security and hunt-down the criminals act, however, with extraordinary agility and alacrity on the streets to hound out the protest marchers and beat them up ruthlessly. Obviously disturbing questions are raised about their softness in dealing with the band of criminals who now assault the rampart on which our statehood rests.

The making of the Frankenstein seems to be complete. It is a matter of

deny us a Bangladesh of the vision of its founding father.

What happened on 21 August at Bangabandhu Avenue -- let it be clear -- is not just another event. It has, for the first time, brought us face to face with some fundamental questions. It was challenge to the core values of our national security. As a matter of fact the battle lines are now distinctly drawn on either side of which the forces of both ours' and enemy's are neatly arrayed. Those of us who cherish

nation. The criminals' invisible black hand will have to be twisted. Or else they will again stab us from the back. The great hope is the cowardice of the terrorists who seldom confront the challenger. But then it is equally difficult to deal with an invisible enemy. A great deal will depend on how strongly we feel for our cherished way of life.

There was an interesting news item in one of the national dailies. In one of the district towns the pickets for hartal called

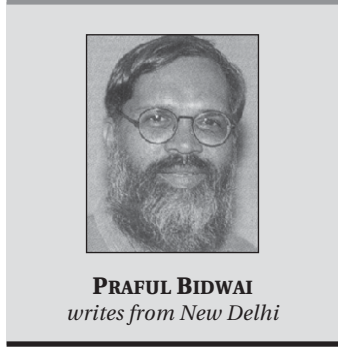
to protest the carnage on 21 August were being chased by the police assisted by some madrasah students, out of all people. While piecing together such tell-tale news items there emerges a pattern that suggests deep nexus between the establishment and the mullahs -- exactly the way it was in Pakistan where an exasperated administration is now trying to manage those elements. The religion of Islam is too great to be left exclusively in the hands of these half baked mullahs unable to fathom its message and discover its beauty.

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It is therefore the time for closing the ranks and major initiative for that lies with the government.

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Crime, politics, and hypocrisy: The BJP's comeuppance



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

HERE is poetic justice in the way the law caught up with Ms Uma Bharati through a Karnataka arrest warrant, forcing her resignation as Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister. Ironically for the BJP, this happened in the middle of its high-decibel campaign against "tainted" ministers -- a strained attempt to occupy the moral high ground.

The BJP should have known better. Many of its top leaders, including Messrs L.K. Advani and M.M. Joshi, face criminal charges. Its former president was caught accepting a bribe by Tehelka.

In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP has proportionally more people with criminal convictions than any other party. Mr Vajpayee re-inducted Mr George Fernandes into his Cabinet although he hadn't been cleared of corruption charges.

The BJP is trying to equate Ms Bharati's case with Coal Minister Shibu Soren's. It also claims the charges are frivolous.

This will not wash. If Mr Soren exited as a villain, Ms Bharati hasn't emerged a martyr. The charges against her are serious: rioting, instigating violence, and attempt to murder during a 1994 agitation to dislodge a Muslim organisation from the Idgah maidan in Hubli. The incident caused 6 deaths.

Ms Bharati's offence in Hubli falls within that category. It was part of the BJP's hate campaign to establish a foothold in Karnataka. Baba Budhangiri in Chikmagalur, and Hubli were its two planks. In the first case, the BJP-VHP tried to "capture" a shrine of a Muslim saint, worshipped by Hindus. In Hubli, it tried to occupy the Idgah maidan.

The most despicable part of this mobilisation was the abuse of the National Flag as a *Hindutva* symbol.

band and the (Buddhist) Ashoka Chakra.

The BJP cunningly made a threefold calculation in asking Ms Bharati to resign. First, this might help boost its demand that "tainted" RJD leaders like Mr Laloo Prasad and Mr Taslimuddin should quit. Second, the *Tiranga Yatra* from Hubli to Jallianwala Bagh may gather momentum.

Third, it would be rid of Ms Bharati herself. She has become a source of

New evidence is emerging from the Nanavati-Shah commission hearings of Mr Modi's culpability. Officials' testimonies confirm that Mr Modi personally decided to bring the Godhra victims' bodies to Ahmedabad. Former state police chief K. Chakravarti confesses he ordered his officers to investigate the "conspiracy angle" -- an implicit admission that the violence was pre-planned.

Other evidence is emerging too,

decisive rung ... ignored the specific instructions ... [and got] direct verbal instructions from the ... ruling party."

This evidence should be systematically collated and used in the trial courts to pin down the culprits. The Modi government cannot be expected to do this. It is the greatest culprit of all. The Centre must set up a new inquiry commission, and implead itself as a party in all the relevant litigation. The UPA owes this to the people of Gujarat and to our Constitution.

The UPA's Common Minimum Programme promised to "to preserve, protect and promote social harmony and to enforce the law ... to deal with all obscurantist and fundamentalist elements." Barring the announcement by Railway Minister Laloo Prasad of an inquiry into the Godhra incident, it has done little to bring justice to the people of Gujarat.

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Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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Ms Bharati ignored 100 summons and as many 18 non-bailable warrants. But she has no right to evade trial.

The BJP makes a curious distinction between "political" and "criminal" cases. It says its opponents are dacoits, murderers, etc., but its own leaders are charged with "political" offences -- like razing the Babri mosque.

This distinction is utterly spurious. The demolition was a horrible act, a vile communal crime, whose gravity was compounded by the mass lynchings that followed, leading to hundreds of deaths, especially in Mumbai. Such hate-acts are far more reprehensible than individual crimes. They must be more severely punished.

This only makes the offence graver. But this is related to the Hindu communalists' false equation of themselves with the nation. They challenge the minorities to prove their "loyalty" -- by prostrating before the majority.

As Sumit Sarkar and others argue in *Saffron Flags, Khaki Shorts* (Orient Longman, 1993), this equation is characteristic of majoritarianism. It distorts the true nature of the national community, comprised of equal citizens. It is profoundly anti-democratic.

The BJP's top leaders owe their primary loyalty not to the Tricolour but to the RSS's triangular saffron flag. For decades, the RSS rejected the National Flag's green (read, "Islamic") colour-

embarrassment for the BJP because of her family's antics.

The first two stratagems are a big gamble. It's unclear that many people will be taken in by the "tainted ministers" campaign and the flag-hoisting argument. They know how to demarcate "flag-hoisting" from communal incitement. Ironically, the only certainty is Ms Bharati's removal from power!

The law may be catching up with Mr Narendra Milosevic Modi too. The Supreme Court has ordered Gujarat to reopen 2,100 cases of violence (half the total), which were summarily closed on the pretext that the police could not trace the accused.

Probe into recent bombings: Some suggestions

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

THE entire nation today stands dumbfounded and shocked by the recent bombings at the public meeting of the main opposition party and attempt on the life of the leader of the opposition, Sheikh Hasina. We pray for the salvation of the dead, the innocent passers by, and ordinary civilians, including the lives of the front line activists. Needless to point out that the perpetrators of the crime should be identified as soon as possible through appropriate and independent enquiry and brought to justice.

There has been a continuous cry for international level enquiry involving assistance already offered by Great Britain, the European Union, USA, and India. As much as I would like to see the culprits brought to justice, I do have reservations about involving other nations in the process of the inquiry.

Bangladesh is about the only secular country amongst the third world countries in this region with nearly 90 percent of its population being Muslims. Contrary to popular belief, in recent times the strategic importance of the country

has increased particularly in the backdrop of Bush/Blair's global war on terrorism.

The problem of involving these countries to participate in the enquiry is that, in all probability, the outcome is most likely to influence the final conclusions aimed at serving their common

agreed to send troops to Iraq. The Bush/Blair axis has almost run aground in its efforts to mobilise additional troops for Iraq. It is thus looking for ways and means whereby countries like Bangladesh could be coerced into sending troops to Iraq, a country the majority of whose population happens to be Mus-

is therefore imperative that we carefully assess the situation with regard to foreign involvement in the inquiry into the bombings. It may be true that by involving USA in this way, we may have some immediate "gains" but in longer terms it may turn out to be counterproductive and put the country's sovereignty in jeopardy.

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interests rather than provide a "solution" for us. As a matter of fact, it may even jeopardise our greater national interests.

What could be the basis of such reasoning? One only has to analyse the most immediate concerns of USA and Great Britain with regard to its ongoing global war on terrorism. Amongst the Muslim countries, except for Pakistan, no other Muslim nation in real terms could be described as a full-time partner of USA/Great Britain in their war against terrorism. Pakistan so far has not

lims.

The simple way to do this would be to take the lead from the findings of the "inquiry" and then include the name of Bangladesh in its list of terrorist countries. The axis also needs to show that even Muslim nations stand shoulder to shoulder in its "noble cause." One also has to realise that USA is the only superpower capable of manipulating and intimidating any country it so wishes in order to meet its selfish interests. History bears testimony to that fact. It

eignty in jeopardy.

Having said all this, it is now up to us to find ways and means to effectively go about the inquiry/investigation and bring the culprits to book. Before the process of inquiry begins, both the ruling party and the opposition must agree upon its modalities. The entire political hierarchy on both sides of the fence must view the situation from the premise that the magnitude of the bombings go beyond partisan interests without less undermining the gravity of the attack on

the most reputed members of the civil society, individuals of a very high caliber and having a track record of unquestionable integrity. The specific job of this committee would be restricted to framing of the terms of reference only.

Then there should be an investigating committee to conduct the actual work at the ground level. The committee should be constituted taking the best personnel from all major intelligence agencies of the country to be headed by an ex-Inspector General of Police or a retired

Judge of the Supreme Court, entrusted with the dual task of overseeing intelligence collection, framing of charges, and submitting the final report for final implementation. It is important to note that both the committee on preparation of terms of reference and the intelligence committee must work within given time frames.

To most of us, the suggested plans, given the prevailing political culture, may appear to be overambitious and unrealistic. It is up to the two major political parties to make the right moves. I am certain they will have nothing but unqualified support from the entire nation. I have just returned from Pakistan after a five-week visit. Even in that environment of a "dictatorial-cum-police state" a process of dialogue between the main opposition and the ruling party do prevail, no matter how limited in scope. In this context I must point out that the recent refusal of the leader of the opposition to meet the prime minister was indeed short-sighted and certainly do not speak of any real political wisdom.

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Freedom of belief in Islam

SYEDA SULTANA RAZIA

THE Quranic declaration: "Let there be no compulsion in religion, truth stands out clear from error" (2:256) ensures tolerance, freedom of belief, and absence of compulsion in Islam. We can find such declarations throughout the course of the Prophet's (SM) stay in Makkah as well as during the time he spent in the different political environment of Medina. Furthermore, verses like the following:

"Those who believe, then disbelieve, then again believe, then disbelieve and thereafter go on increasing in disbelief, Allah will never forgive them, nor guide them to any way of deliverance" (4:137)

proclaim that not only the doors to enter the circle of Islam are open for everyone but also the doors to depart

from it are open. One would think that these references from the Quran should be able to establish the freedom of belief in Islam without any reservations.

Ironically, the freedom of belief, particularly the issue of apostasy, is still one of the major sources of confusion and contradiction among contemporary Muslims.

Why is that? According to Dr. Jamal Badawi, a member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research and the Fiqh Council of North America:

"There are scholars who distinguish between apostasy on a personal level, which is not punishable by death, and apostasy that is accompanied by what we call today high treason, in which case the punishment is for high treason, not for apostasy."

The truth, however, is that many of the traditional/classical interpreters

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do not distinguish between these two types. This is where the contradiction begins.

In the era of communication revolution, the world is growing ever more interdependent. The lines between foreign and domestic policy are becoming less distinct. The freedom of belief in Muslim societies is no longer an internal issue alone. It also impacts on the Muslim world's relationship with other states, cultures, and peoples. Thus this issue needs to be clarified and articulated unambiguously if Muslim society is to establish itself

as a transparent and just society and to coexist with other nations peacefully.

Any such effort will be incomplete without the consideration of the major scholarly work, namely, *Towards an Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Direction for Methodology and Thought* by Dr. Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman. According to the author, the traditional opinion regarding apostasy has two problems. One is a disregard of the space-time factor; the other is conceptual confusion. Similar view is hold by Dr. Hashim Kamali, another

major contemporary scholar, who explained the issue in details in his work *Freedom of Expression in Islam*.

What is the space-time factor? During the time of prophet the issue of apostasy related to the hypocrisy and conspiracy of some Jewish groups as mentioned in Quran.

"A faction of the People of the Book say: Believe in the morning what is revealed to the believers, but reject it at the end of the day; perchance they may turn back. And believe no one unless he follows your religion." (3:72-73)

One can imagine how badly this can affect the morale of the young Muslim community and how big a threat it can pose to it while surrounded by extremely hostile forces. Imposing a death sentence on any of these people, is an exception rather than the rule for apostasy, where apostasy is accompanied by grievous crimes such as conspiracy and rebellion. Prophet Muhammad (SM) sentenced the hypocrite Abu Sarh to death, but this judgement was later waived at the desperate request of Uthman ibn

Affan. This is the lone example of capital punishment for apostasy during the prophet's lifetime, which was not even executed. Accepting such punishment as a basic law would mean ignoring the space-time considerations that played an important role in determining the gravity of the punishment.

The second problem, i.e. the conceptual confusion, was created by the classical jurists when they took any prophetic act at its face value rather than for the meaning or purpose it conveyed. They mixed up political conspiracy with the exercise of freedom of belief, a basic human right. Thus apostasy to them meant the death penalty with little concern for any deeper analysis.

This kind of erroneous interpretation goes against the very spirit of

Islam, which advocates peace, tolerance and justice. It also destroys the confidence of Muslims with genuine concern for the welfare of humanity in general.

So what is the conclusion? In Abu Sulayman's words: "It is very important for Muslims to keep in focus the basic and central values of individual moral responsibility and freedom of belief and conscience in Islam and not to be lost in formal, legalistic, and short-sighted academic arguments about details and textual materials. Ideological freedom is a basic necessity for any constructive, peaceful and humane ideology, both internally and externally."

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