

Bomb blast: Terms of reference for inquiry

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IT is reassuring to see that the government has finally decided to take the devastating bomb blast incident of August 21 seriously and has decided to carry out high level investigations to unearth the heinous crime committed in a public place. A one-man inquiry commission under a justice of the High Court has been convened. Foreign experts have also been invited. A parallel five-man committee has also been convened by the Supreme Court Bar Association headed by Dr. Kamal Hossain to carry out the investigation.

It seems that utmost importance is being given to this one incident only. During the last few years, at least sixteen bombings took place in the country, and a huge quantity of arms, ammunition, and explosives were captured during the last one year period, but unfortunately, due importance to that has not been paid to these other incidents.

Since an attempt on the life of a top party leader was made and a very important political leader died in the grenade attack that also killed and injured many party members, August 21 became a national issue. Prior to this, all bombing and related incidents were more or less ignored, although those also needed to be given utmost importance from a national point of view.

To recapitulate the past incidents

of bombing, the first bomb attack took place in 1999, in a cinema hall in Jessore. One Mr. Iqbal Kabir who lost both of his legs in that attack and many more were injured. Next was a cinema hall at Mymensingh where the manager Mr. Phool Babu lost one of his legs and many others were also injured.

Another attack took place on cinema halls in Sylhet. After that, an attempt was made to kill the British High commissioner in Sylhet. Until that time, in all these bombing incidents, home-made bombs were used which were not so lethal. Recently an army grenade is believed to have been thrown at a meeting of the Awami League in Sylhet where one Awami League leader was killed and many more seriously injured.

One of the most important issues the government has ignored is the capture and finding of huge amounts of arms and ammunition smuggled into the country. The cache found in Bogra had magazines of latest military weapons and masses of ammunition used by the military. Vehicles and the dumping spot were located, but no one was taken to task and no further news came up in public.

In Badda (Dhaka) area some military rifles and army grenades were captured along with some agents/gun runners. No further news was heard about these, although there should have been a clear press note from the govern-

ment or agencies for public consumption. Little importance was given by the authorities to the capture of those military model weapons although people of the country were very much concerned and wanted to know the facts.

In the southern part of Chittagong district a good number of military weapons were captured

agencies present in the port area like port intelligence, customs intelligence, Coast Guard, SB, NSI, DGF1, etc?

All these issues became a mystery in the eyes of our own people and diplomats alike.

Last of all, the rise of the so-called Bangla Bhai has baffled the people of the country. Some say

existed. There police sought the help of those unauthorised Bangla Bhai cadres to counter the Sharbahara party cadres. Many newspapers not only published news about the activities of Bangla Bhai cadres, but also printed the photographs of its leader Bangla Bhai and also the photo of a victim executed by him, whose body was

a) The source and origin of the country of export of all the new military weapons captured. Destination and likely end user of the weapons, ammunitions, grenades, and explosives.

b) Identifying the group (or groups) involved in bombing in all the places at Jessore, Mymensingh, Sylhet, and Dhaka.

people and the properties must be brought out during investigations.

g) During most of the incidences like throwing bomb at British High Commissioner, Awami League gathering at Sylhet and Dhaka, adequate police protection was provided. Why did the police fail?

We should not be too happy to see Interpol. Interpol keeps track of human trafficking, drugs, arms runners, clandestine mercenary operations, etc. They are incapable of carrying out intricate investigations, but can always recommend utilisation of efficient organisations for successful investigations.

We positively need the help of efficient organisations like Scotland Yard, or of some European countries, if not the FBI. A reputed international crime investigation department along with Interpol supported by local police and other intelligence agencies can really track down the source and origin of these arms and grenades shipped to Chittagong, Badda, and Bogra. It should be able to trace back the receiving agencies and the godfathers here in Bangladesh, provided our agencies give full cooperation.

Many people are sensitive to the involvement of FBI in the country for such an investigation because of US intelligence agencies clandestine operations in the internal politics of some countries. In spite of this, one must agree that it is the US intelligence agencies which

have the access and capabilities to unearth the arms and drug running groups in any country of the world.

If we leave the authority of investigation to our local agencies to reveal the truth, we may not get anywhere. Full authority should be given to the FBI or Scotland Yard to prepare the investigation report and make it public. The people are anxiously awaiting the outcome.

The government should not confine the inquiry only to the incident of August 21, but deal with that in total perspective. If not handled that way, only the tip of a cancerous mole will be removed, but the cancer will spread internally to destroy the body soon.

The people have lost confidence, not only in our leaders, but also in our ability to live in safety. Everyone is asking the question: Is there security of our life in this country?

The first and foremost task of the government will be to revive the sense of security amongst its own people. Then to tell the world community that it is a safe country to travel to and do business with. The recent flood has already taken its toll on our economy and the bomb culture could take the rest of it.

The writer served as Director Military Operations in AHQs and also served as Bangladesh Ambassador in many countries.

Poverty and health policies: Listening to the poor

SABINA FAIZ RASHID

DR. Rounaq Jahan and Dr. Zakir Husain's discussions on health sector reform has prompted me to add another dimension to this debate -- the experiences of the poor in Bangladesh. The poor whose lives are directly affected by various health policies, but who tend to have very little say in how we can better meet their needs. Dr. Husain's article emphasises the need for an 'open forum robust and representative ... a forum that articulates and advocates consumer's concerns." Time and time again we speak of the need for more evidence based health policy and programming where more diverse voices should be heard. It is unfortunate that after 30+ years and the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars in health interventions into Bangladesh, the overall health of poor women, pregnant and nursing mothers and infants remains disappointing with little significant improvements. Having recently worked in urban slums for a period of 15 months, I would like to share how poverty (increasingly a global as well as local process) contributes to particular life conditions for the poor and critically shapes their health experiences and practices.

The assumption often among policymakers is that mere provision of health services and better choices will improve health of the poor. However, throughout my fieldwork, I was confronted by overwhelming structural and social inequalities which have led to high unemployment, crime, widespread substance abuse and the breakdown of family networks and marital relations in slums; all of which critically impact on poor women's lives and reproductive health. Acute poverty and competition over scarce resources in slums force many poor married adolescent and older women to tolerate bad marriages, abuse, forced and unsafe sex, multiple pregnancies, and coerced abortions. Poor women construct a "political economy of the body" in their reproductive and sexual health negotiations, often at a cost to their bodies and health. The lives of poor women and men in slums are embedded in conditions that allow for little to no choice. There are disabling structures that leave both poor men and especially women with no alternatives and little agency to change their position. For the poor, health cannot be separated from social and political - economic conditions of everyday life. While health is a priority for us, it

is a luxury for the poor, whose lives are plagued by multiple oppressions and social injustices.

To illustrate my point, let me share with you a case study of a

had shut down.

Following the September 11 attacks in the United States, there was a world recession and the RMG sector was badly affected in Bangla-

for 10 days before her bleeding stopped.

She decided to have an (illegal) abortion because monetarily it cost her nothing. A termination from a

brother for the treatment. Her husband, who had recently found work as a labourer, would now have to work for more than two months to repay the loan, pushing them fur-

If we truly want to see improvements in the health of poor women and men in Bangladesh, we need a more radical and broader based approach to health, where social and economic justice need to be an integral part of medicine and public health interventions. To acknowledge the role of social and political-economic factors in health is critical in health sector reform and an inadequate recognition can drive any future reform to failure and further misspent resources.

typical few weeks in a slum woman's life. Farida is 16 years old, married and has a 10-month-old baby boy. When the government forcibly evicted them from their slum, Farida and her family moved into her uncle's home. Like most slum homes, her room was no bigger than 30 square feet, tiny, damp and dark. There was a torn sheet on the bed and her baby boy sat on the edge of the bed crying. Farida informed me that she was three months pregnant, anxious, and tense. She worried about her husband Sayed who does not have a steady job. She used to work in a garment factory but had not been paid for few months as the factory

desh. Farida's brother-in-law promised to help them financially but was facing difficulties himself, having recently lost his job due to the ban on three-stroke baby taxis. Farida's uncle threatened to evict them because they were unable to pay rent. Farida and Sayed discussed her pregnancy and although they were both keen to have another child, this was not the best time. A few days later we found out that Farida had a crude abortion and was bleeding profusely. With the help of a traditional healer, she had inserted a (plant) root into herself. They rushed to the pharmacy and bought some medicines to control her fever and bleeding. Farida bled

clinic would have cost about Taka 400, money they did not have and if they did, they could not afford to spend. They needed money to meet their basic needs -- food and rent. As she explained: "To treat this will cost me money. Will I spend money on treatment or will I spend whatever money I have to buy food? I think the money spent on myself will be better used to buy food for all of us for three days. What options do I have? My husband is unemployed and I have a baby now. We have to eat!" A few weeks later her baby fell sick with severe diarrhoea and fever and they had to rush to a nearby hospital for treatment. Farida borrowed Taka 2000 from her elder

ther into a cycle of debt, poverty, and increased misery.

Farida's experiences are typical of the countless stories I heard and documented while working in the slums. Unable to afford housing, these families live in shack settlements in the worst, most congested and unhygienic conditions, with unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation, and overflowing sewage. They live in constant fear of eviction. Poorly skilled and uneducated, they cope with erratic employment opportunities, with most families never having enough assets or cash to save or plan for the future, as they struggle each day to survive.

Farida's life raises many important questions: what do we mean by health experiences or even health seeking behaviour when we look at the lives of the poor? Can we separate health or even reproductive health experiences from other aspects of their lives, the material, social, and political-economic? How do the broader macro and micro factors affect health experiences and behaviour? What multiple effects might poverty have on the poor and their health experiences?

Farida's life situation highlights the need to understand the wider structural and political economic inequalities in which the lives of the poor are embedded, which sculpt particular health experiences. In Bangladesh, health interventions implicitly follow biomedical definitions of health and focus on symptoms and treatment rather than more holistic approaches to causes of illness. Universal education in public health and biology and the availability of Western medical care are seen as preferred forms of intervention to improve the health situation of the country.

However, in the context of Bangladesh, where a majority of the population live in severe poverty, it is critical not to ignore the broader

political, social and economic processes that contribute to certain life conditions, and adverse health experiences. While better and more sensitive health services will no doubt ease the suffering of the poor, the fundamental constraints to improving their lives and health of the poor are structural and social inequalities, which force them to remain an underclass, unable to realise their health potential. If we truly want to see improvements in the health of poor women and men in Bangladesh, we need a more radical and broader based approach to health, where social and economic justice need to be an integral part of medicine and public health interventions. To acknowledge the role of social and political-economic factors in health is critical in health sector reform and an inadequate recognition can drive any future reform to failure and further misspent resources.

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War, terror, and the space in between

MJ AKBAR

THE fog of elections is no less poisonous than the fog of war, so it is unsurprising if good sense dies a thousand deaths in the process. President George Bush made a sensible remark recently when he suggested that it was impossible to win the war against terrorism. The candour was unusual for a politician, and almost unbelievable during an election in which George Bush has bet his whole presidency on the assumption that enough Americans will believe that he rather than John Kerry can lay to rest the nightmare of 9/11. Candour died instantly when Kerry challenged honesty with deception. The war could be won, he claimed, which is within the bounds of reason; but his implication that he knew how to win it was electoral fraud. Naturally, it worked. Bush retracted, and a chance for a genuine debate on a complex problem at a defining moment was lost. Instead of a debate we will see one-liner upmanship. The discussion might as well be handed over to Jay Leno and David Letterman who, in any case, make more sense on most issues. Bush is right in the sense that it is impossible to eliminate crime or violence. But an invisible line measures civilisation, and everyone knows when that line has been crossed, for two steps beyond it lie either fear or chaos. A terror map of the world would make startling viewing. Very little space would be in calm white; most of the world would be in crimson red. The four largest democracies of the world, India, the United States, Russia and Indonesia are engaged in this war for separate reasons, and deal with it in different ways. There is always controversy about methods, since one man's terrorist is so often another man's freedom fighter. There are few signs of

conflict-resolution: the faces of the children of Beslan are now etched into our consciousness. (It is incidental perhaps but nevertheless relevant to note that many of the schoolchildren were local Muslims.) The pain of this war is immense and must include the hidden pain of the desperate young men and women who are ready to die to send a message.

I believe that the war on terrorism can be won, but the first, critical, stage is to get the definitions correct. We must mean what we say, and we must know what we mean. Let us take the most obvious example of a misplaced dictionary. George Bush went to war in Iraq ostensibly to find illegal weapons of mass destruction. Let me suggest the names of two nations with weapons of mass destruction without the approval of legitimate world bodies. India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons that were condemned as illegitimate, and which provoked international sanctions. Neither the United States nor Britain has considered invading either Delhi or Islamabad. Bush should have said what he meant; that he was not going after weapons of mass destruction, but rogue governments that he could not trust. That story would have had a happier ending.

The problem with war on terrorism is that while there is now sufficient consensus on the meaning of terrorism, there is equal confusion about the definition of war. Where is the primary battlefield of that war, on the ground, or in the mind? The dilemmas only begin at this point. What if the suicide-missionary is born in the rubble of a mistake, or the devastation of injustice? What if the pursuit of terror multiplies its dimensions? Is there any count of Iraqi teenagers who only wanted an education yesterday but want a gun today? Are the terrorists of Chechnya taking revenge for some terror that never appeared on our

television screens? These questions would have inevitably flowed from the debate that Bush initiated and Kerry aborted.

To my knowledge there have

done. It is also important that they kept the conflict at the level of a police operation, rather than depending totally on the Army. This was true of the Indian govern-

set foot in Iraq, as the Arab king. But the struggle for power against variations of neo-colonialism continued. At least one Iraqi monarch, Ghazi, openly supported

thought I glimpsed the first sign of honest uncertainty in Bush's statement. Recognition of the truth is halfway to solving the problem. The need in both Iraq and

If you want to see how power can change character consider the remarkable case of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, once famed as warlord and fundamentalist, and mentor of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the brains behind 9/11. So where is Sayyaf as we head towards September 11, 2004? Being courted by America's favourite Afghan, Hamid Karzai, for support in the coming elections in Afghanistan, and one of the key players in the Kabul establishment. Yesterday's fundamentalist is today's American ally, despite 9/11.

been at least three notable victories by the state over urban/rural insurrections: in Malaysia in the 1950s, when a Communist challenge was neutralised; in large parts of India in the last part of the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s, when Naxalites were quelled; and in Punjab in the 1980s, when Sikh separatists were defeated. The key to each success was the protection of public opinion. While mistakes were made -- sometimes ones that extracted a very heavy price, as Operation Bluestar and the Sikh riots of 1984 did -- the rebels never succeeded in getting more than temporary or partial sympathy from the people. One reason was ideological. Atheism did not appeal to the Muslims in Malaysia. The Naxalites similarly alienated themselves from Indian nationalism with their declaration that Chairman Mao was their chairman. And the broad mass of Punjab's peasantry never quite understood why they should separate from the motherland. But there was also a simultaneous political process that assuaged the reasons for discontent. The British, who were an imperial power in Malaysia, realised that their time was over, and left once the job was

ment's response to Naxalites as well. The distinction is vital. The police is not only civilian in its uniform. It is civilian in its thinking. This does not necessarily make it civil. But the police know how to use and mobilise resources from the population, and involve the people. The battle is never for bodybags alone. The state can always kill a multiple of the number it loses. The battle is also for advantage in the mind.

During the Naxalite movement and the Punjab rebellion, the Indian state was on the side of Indian nationalism. This is why it prevailed.

The great mistake made by George Bush in Iraq and Vladimir Putin in Chechnya is that they may have gifted nationalism to fundamentalists and suicide-missionaries. Iraq's nationalist aspirations go back to before the First World War, when small but significant groups sought independence from the Ottoman Caliph. This exploded into an insurrection when the British continued their occupation after the end of the war. Winston Churchill, the colonial secretary of the empire, bought a sort of peace by nominating Feisal, a Hashemite prince who had never

nationalist forces and ended up being assassinated. Oil and nationalism are synonymous in the region, and one reason for Saddam Hussein's initial popularity was his successful, even brilliant, nationalisation of Iraqi oil. (Success went to his head, and he soon turned into a megalomaniac.) It is entirely logical that the sabotage of oil supplies is on the top of the agenda of the forces fighting the American presence in Iraq.

In the Caucasus, nationalism has inspired war for nearly two hundred years. The Chechens resisted Tsarists in 1818 and the Bolsheviks in 1917. Just as certain army officers in Iraq tried to use the Germans to get rid of the British in the Second World War; just as an Indian called Subhas Bose took the help of the Germans and the Japanese to march against the British in the Second World War; the Chechens took the help of the Germans against the Russians in 1942. Stalin's response after victory was not gentle. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Chechens again demanded independence. Boris Yeltsin's response would have pleased Stalin.

Nothing is irreversible, and I

Chechnya is surely to wrench nationalism back from those who believe that their salvation lies in

taking schoolchildren hostage. Perhaps Bush does mean what he says when he wants democracy in Iraq. But the fundamental principle of democracy is to let power go where it may. If the popular will is with those you do not like, then popular will must prevail over your preferences. A stooge government invites more ridicule than an occupying authority. It is also an invitation to violence.

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