

## Dhamrai incident

Bring the culprits to book

THE news that there was an attack by armed hooligans on some Hindu families in a Dhamrai village is extremely disturbing, and so are the developments that followed it.

The members of the minority Hindu community are suffering from a sense of insecurity after some armed groups pounced on them with the motive of grabbing their land. The trouble originated from the ownership of a water-body that had been settled by a court in favour of the minority community. So the attackers not only perpetrated a heinous crime but also violated a court verdict. Yet, the law enforcers were silent over the issue. The officer-in-charge of the local police station has said that he did not have enough force to counter the threats posed by the attackers. That is a point which the decision makers should take note of. Obviously, the vulnerable groups of people will have nobody to turn to if police themselves say that they had no way to prevent the mayhem.

The response from the local political leaders has also been equally depressing. The local MP appeared to be under the impression that it was a trifling matter that did not warrant a strong response from their side. He admitted having realised a bit late that things had taken a serious turn. Obviously, the victims were expecting the local leaders to come to their rescue and it is evident that routine assurances with no specific action plan to rein in the criminals will not be enough.

Land grabbing by influential people with political clout is a problem that the members of the minority community often complain about. The grabbers take advantage of the vulnerability of the minority community aggravated by the weak presence of the law enforcers and the lack of willingness at the political level to stop the illegal activity. The Dhamrai incident has clearly shown how the members of the minority community were targeted despite a court verdict in their favour.

The incident must not be treated as an ordinary crime. Crimes like these can deal fatal blows to communal harmony and greatly erode the confidence of the minority communities in the efficacy of the existing law enforcement system. The culprits must immediately be brought to book and measures adopted to ensure the safety of the local Hindus.

## Private management of railway services

Profitable as expected but room for improvement

We are pleased to note that the government's initiative to put railway services in the northern districts under private management has helped Bangladesh Railway (BR) move from loss to profit in the region's operations. We have long been an advocate of running the loss-making sectors of BR under private management in the expectation that this would help turn things around both in terms of the quality of service provided and BR's bottom line.

Four years ago, in the wake of continuous losses, a significant number of mail and local trains in the north-east region of the country were handed over to a private company for management. The results are mixed, but encouraging enough to term the initiative a qualified success.

Putting the railway services under private management has certainly helped BR stem the losses that it was suffering in the region, and it is gratifying to see that this aspect of the undertaking has turned out as hoped for.

However, the downside is that service on the privately managed lines has not improved to the extent that was anticipated. In fact, according to reports, the service on these lines might have deteriorated since the handover to private management.

There is little advantage to the public if profits are reaped at the expense of good service. The private management company suggests that the poor service can be attributed to the fact that BR has not fulfilled its obligations with respect to providing logistical and technical support. BR denies this.

Either way, it is clear that both parties need to work in closer coordination so that the public can reap maximum benefit from the arrangement. Private management that does not provide better service to the consumer cannot be termed an unqualified success.

Nevertheless, the fact that the lines are now running profitably is encouraging. The next step is for BR and the private company to sort out their differences to ensure that the quality of service is also enhanced. Only then we would be able to term the private management initiative an unqualified success. We hope that this is the direction in which BR is heading.

## Religion between culture and politics

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

SHOULD the world dread the possibility of the rise of religious intolerance? Should we read into the Bush victory a not so insignificant role played by the Christian Right which appears to have blended well with the prominent shade of the Republican Party's conservative wing epitomising the values of economic individualism, Social Darwinism, and nationalism?

Historian Bernard Lewis and his critical essays on Islam are read with messianic devotion. Samuel Huntington, credited with providing a credible explanation of global turbulence in terms of clash of civilisations, is now being adulated as a great native son for his enquiry into the hybridisation of the US mainland due to the "invasion and settlement" of large number of Spanish speaking people from the south whose language and culture are distinct from those of mainstream Americans.

Transnationalism, an inevitable phenomenon of globalisation, is now treated with suspicion in the West despite having the power to define, in the words of Ziauddin Sardar, "freedom, progress and civil behaviour, law, tradition and community; what is real and what it means to be human. The non-western civilisations have simply to accept these definitions or be defined out of existence."

This phobic suspicion of anything remotely different from the core politico-cultural practices is of course a result of 9/11, but now translated as intrusion into the privacy of groups of people, citizens and aliens alike, totally repugnant to the liberal values hitherto espoused and practiced by the West. This intrusion has been particularly prominent in the lives of people practicing religions not followed by the majority in the West. Scholars have generally believed that religions

have too often been used to "justify the violation of human rights, in part through the hierarchical and selective use of role ethics and postponement of temporal justice to divine judgement."

It has been argued that the ethic of reciprocity demands religious tolerance. In Christianity, for example, the concept has been defined in

for self-preservation. Since the world we live in is far from the Kantian world federation of perpetual peace, where actions of any sort are neither taken from a sense of duty nor dictated by reason and often are performed for expediency, absolute freedom of speech and expression on religious matters had to be circumscribed at that time in

evil of the Deity with impious purpose to derogate from the divine majesty and to alienate the minds of others from love and reverence of God."

Though blasphemy law in England was enacted to protect the Anglican version of Christianity, its application has been rare. Americans too feel uncomfortable by the

laws that are inherently bad legislation, the language of the laws were ambiguous, the objectives were dubious, and the laws lacked the protection of guarantee against misuse. The UN Commission called upon Pakistan to repeal all discriminatory laws including the blasphemy laws and ratify human rights treaties that it has not yet ratified.

We in Bangladesh should be cautious about the dangers of religious extremism in view of the on-going agitation by an extremist Islamic group to declare the Ahmadiyyas in Bangladesh as non-Muslims. Amnesty International head Irene Khan has expressed her grave concern over this continuing agitation. She reportedly viewed Bangladesh as a fractured society, one group trying to adorn the country with democracy and modernity while the other in bent upon taking the country along the path of religious intolerance.

Our caution needs to be redoubled due to the mistaken belief in some parts of the West that the convulsions in the Islamic world are because of its intolerance of the House of the Unbelief -- Christendom -- a competing world religion and a distinct civilisation; little realising that the convulsions could have been caused by the struggle between monotheistic Islamists and the moderate Muslim elements to capture the soul of the Islamic world.

idea of punishing someone for blasphemy. It runs counter to the freedom of religion and freedom of expression, both guaranteed in the First Amendment of the US Constitution. The US Supreme Court never had to decide on a blasphemy case. But in 1952 it ruled on a similar matter. Justice Tom Clark observed: "It is not the business of government in our nation to suppress real or imagined attacks upon particular religious doctrine." Gradually, state courts found prosecution of blasphemy cases unconstitutional or unenforceable. No prosecution for blasphemy has taken place in the US since 1971.

It would perhaps be instructive if the impact of blasphemy laws in neighbouring countries were discussed. In the Indian sub-continent the British enacted the blasphemy laws to protect minority Muslims from possible attacks from majority Hindus. After the creation of Pakistan, as the Muslims became the majority community there was no reason to keep the laws in the statute book. But instead of abolition, the laws were made more stringent.

Legislation undertaken during 1980-1991 (life imprisonment was replaced by mandatory death pen-

This shows that the Muslims against fellow Muslims to settle old scores are abusing the laws more blatantly. Jurists have raised questions as to whether a non-Muslim can be sentenced to death as he is already a "kafir" (non-believer) and not a "murtad" (a person who repudiates Islam after embracing it).

Without delving into the complexities of the Islamic laws on this issue, one can safely make the observation that the blasphemy laws and their stringent applications have not raised the image of Pakistan in the world as a tolerant Muslim country. The UN Commission on Human Rights, referring to Pakistani blasphemy laws, observed: "When religious discrimination is inscribed in laws and imbedded in societal structures, this often leads to victimisation of minorities as well as killings and assassinations."

The UN Commission reminded Pakistan that the laws over the years have resulted in religious intolerance and violence against Christians, Hindus and members of the Ahmadiyya community. The commission further reminded Pakistan of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Pakistan which held that the mere use of the laws was an abuse since

nel to prevent other innocents, including children, from being murdered.

(6) Do you shoot back at someone trying to kill you while standing deliberately behind a group of children? You exercise the same care as you would for any non-combatant in the line of fire.

(7) Do you raid terrorist headquarters hidden in a mental hospital? One applies the same rule of keeping care that non-combatants do not come into the line of fire, this is also true for those terrorists who deliberately use children as a human shield.

The civilised world still has illusions that it is possible to enforce the rule of law in a totally lawless environment. No country has a law against cannibals eating citizens because such an act would be unthinkable, but it is the world evaluated options of bringing the unthinkable into the statute books.

Does international law address killers shooting from hospitals and mosques? The punishment for "suicide bombings" should be death or arrest before they commit the actual act of murder, but how do you prosecute the "suicide bomber" afterwards? The same punishment must apply to those who incite and/or abet "suicide bombing".

Terrorism can only be fought on a broad front, targeting all those who are not only connected directly to the perpetrator but all those who indirectly give sustenance. The rules of international law have changed after every world war, and in countries such as Pakistan one has to take cognisance of our domestic situation and amend the laws to suit the prevailing circumstances. How well we can differentiate in meting out punishment (and reward) will determine our success ratio in fighting this growing threat, one that has the potential of dissolving society into anarchy.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

## Understanding terrorism

IKRAM SEHGAL  
writes from Karachi

HERE is a lot of rhetoric in Pakistan, as indeed in the world, about the need to fight terrorism, yet how much do we understand how terrorism germinates in society, how it is incubated and then proliferates? There is a dire need to study the root causes and effects of terrorism. Without a clear understanding of these, one can put out small fire here and there, but can we stop the conflagration from spreading? For several centuries Muslims have not only been oppressed but since the 19th century they have been increasingly brutalised. People living in terror eventually react in kind. Because in the recent past most terrorism is perceived to have emanated from Muslim causes, it is important that we analyse these dispassionately.

We cannot confine our study to understanding terrorism as sponsored and practised by extremist Muslims, but unfortunately all Muslims have been labelled by a motivated broad brush that links them to modern terrorism. Sometimes one gets the feeling that Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations" is being deliberately made a self-fulfilling prophecy. The great silent majority of Muslims have got this reputation of collaboration, by default.

Haim Harari, a former president of the Weizman Institute of Science has expressed it best: "The vast silent majority of millions of decent people are either very devout Muslims or are not very religious. These Muslims are not part of the terror and of the incitement, but by not standing up against it, they become accomplices by omission. This includes political leaders, intellectuals, business people, etc who can tell right from wrong but are afraid to express their views."

The latest weapon increasingly employed by terrorists -- "suicide

hated, lies, and ignorance, operating mostly through mosques, madrasas, and other religious establishments. The primary target must be the second circle, not only to get to the source, but that is the only way to break this evil chain. Hatred is generally viciously propagated through incitement in the electronic and print media. The actual perpetrators of terrorism are associated with only a few such institutions, because of their own rhetoric most

of the others become inadvertently part of it by association. In their tunnel vision democracy is unthinkable and they enforce minimum exposure to the outside world, isolation (and ignorance) is where most of their strength is derived from. This is the circle from where the lead is taken to blaming anyone and everyone within and outside the Muslim world for their miseries. Acting as guardians of the people, they make sure that rather than listen to the world outside, the people look and listen inwards to the vicious propaganda of terror and incitement being dished out by the inner circle. Those fighting terrorism must ensure that the public has unrestricted access to independent media.

The civilised world believes in democracy, the rule of law, including international law, human rights, free speech and free press, among other liberties. It also believes in what many take to be naive and old-fashioned habits such as respecting religious sites and symbols, refraining from the use of ambulances and hospitals for acts of war, avoiding the mutilation of dead bodies, and shunning the use of children as human shields or human bombs.

In his dissertation, Haim Harari put forward some interesting questions. There is no doubt that civilised society can be strait-jacketed with limitations, but in the questioning these limitations, one can always find likely answers, viz:

(1) Can a government listen to

## AS I SEE IT

The rules of international law have changed after every world war, and in countries such as Pakistan one has to take cognisance of our domestic situation and amend the laws to suit the prevailing circumstances. How well we can differentiate in meting out punishment (and reward) will determine our success ratio in fighting this growing threat, one that has the potential of dissolving society into anarchy.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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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.

## Story of RAB

The RAB is doing a very good job on the field. They are handling the hardened criminals and have achieved many successes so far. People who love peace and hate terrorism must admit this truth. Although recently RAB has been criticised on the crossfire issue, its success is great. Moreover, most of the people who were the victims of these crossfire were terrorists themselves. They somehow died on the spot and thus people got relieved. Although as a conscious citizen I cannot support this action in its totality, still I cannot think of the horrible situation before RAB appeared on the scene. RAB is a blessing for the peace loving people. I don't understand why opposition parties fail to accept this truth. In these words, RAB is only capturing their leaders and supporters. To them crossfire is a big issue. But people know the truth and thus they

support the activities of RAB without any hesitation.

Muftah Wali

Dhaka

## A response

This letter is in response to Mr. Hussain Touhid's own rebuttal to "Ohio has failed the world" (Wednesday, November 24, 2004). Mr. Touhid, small wonder that you are currently a resident of Texas; however, crude red-neck jokes aside, your previous letter to the editor registered severe misgivings in me. Try and understand, Mr. Touhid, it is exactly through the course of 'rationality' that you talk about that people oppose the Bush regime. If everyone were as irrational as you claim most people to be, then all of mankind would have been more collusive with the idea of unjust wars (the one being waged on Iraq) and divestment of individual freedom (the 'freedom' you feel that

America provides to its citizens by infringing on their civil liberties through the implementation of such atrocities as the Patriot Act).

Mr. Touhid, to further our discussion on how America 'treats its human beings,' I would like you to re-consider your own position as one such 'human being' in the United States. Don't you feel the need to relate to the harsh manner in which the Bush administration is treating the travellers coming to the US (especially travellers who have to carry the 'burden' of being from a Muslim country or having a Muslim name, such as yourself)? Also, do you not, again, feel the need to relate to how the cumulative Muslim community in the United States is being marginalised as a result of Bush's post-9-11 haunt tactics? Lastly, Mr. Touhid, a question with respect to the moral integrity of one particular statement that you articulate. When you say that people

ought to leave their 'emotions aside,' what are you thinking? How is anyone supposed to bracket off their emotive impulses as they assess George Bush and the brutal injustices that are the direct result of his moronic policies at home and draconian hegemony abroad?

Rishad Choudhury

Ohio, United States

## Misplaced priority

The government has just spent Tk 35 crore to build the Ziaur Rahman Mausoleum Complex. A country that can't feed its people, who are "alive" without getting donation from foreign countries, has just spent Tk 35 million on a person who is dead!

I have absolutely no problem with spending money to honour our freedom fighters like Ziaur Rahman and leaders like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But I don't think even Ziaur Rahman himself would have

approved spending such amount of money for a similar project, considering the number of jobless, homeless and hungry people we have. Also, comparing the money spent on Ziaur Rahman's mausoleum, how much money do we spend in cleaning and maintaining the memorials/graves of people like Kazi Nazrul Islam, Pallikabi Jasimuddin, Jainul Abedin, Dr Muhammad Shahidullah et al?

Azad Miah

Oldham, UK

## Hai cricket!

What more Whatmore can do? He has to get out of this misfortune in Sonar Bangla, teaching the nabelegh sona-monies how to wield a stick, not in the streets but on the playing field. The brickbat throwing practice in the streets is not improving matters.

Better try a political coach, as

they are versatile in every field. Who says the politicians cannot bat and bowl? They do not need bat and stumps, and the umpires are not compulsory. They are weak in fielding, as they need MLSS staff (chapparisees in the Raj days).

Our cricket team may be allowed to use two stumps during batting, and four stumps while bowling at the opponents with a small marble ball. The bat may be wider by one more inch, and the pitch lengthened to 25 yards during batting, and shortened to 20 yards during bowling. Batsmen may be declared out at the third attempt, after two 'practice outs'.

We are good in shrimp farming. Add octopuses, for fielding in cricket matches, after training (eight hands each). The burqa ladies may be encouraged to throng the galleries for cheering the team. The maturity of our cricket is proportional to that of our politicians,

although the politicians are jhanu (mature and wise).

AZ, Dhaka

## Speakers and leaders

Ours is a society infested with leaders and speakers. Actually every leader is a speaker. Once a speaker lays hands on the microphone he or she hardly abandons the same unless called thrice by the organiser to do so.

Any speaker usually spits fire against known and unknown enemies of society. These leaders regularly do another thing. This is calling for building up or organising movements and demonstrations against wrong-doers of all types. These calls are given to the audience who usually are victims of these wrong-doers. The speakers call for building movements against slayers of tigers in the Sundarbans and their smugglers, corruption, illegal arms dealers, pheasants, oil dealers, dowry claimants, passport and dollar forgers, conspirators against sovereignty, land and forest grabbers, illegal occupants of rivers and canals, corruption of surveyors of land, traffickers of women and children, goons, murderers, rapists, adulterators and so on. The purpose is to resist the wrong doers and wrong doing in all spheres of life and the calls are addressed to the victims.

If one analyses the scenario one could see that the land grabber is buying date-expired medicine from the dealer who is again a victim of dowry as he has to give his daughter in marriage to the family interested in accepting dowry. Likewise, the adulterator of edible oil is buying rotten milk powder while the customs and police officials for the permission to sell his milk. It is thus ironical, conflicting, paradoxical and painful that this spiralling flowchart is the general situation of our public life.

Advocate Monser Fakir<br