

Rab to tap telephones?

A dangerous tool in hand

TWO ominous inter-related moves are in the offing. The government is learnt to be in the process of providing the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) with cellular and landphone interceptors that would enable them to eavesdrop on telephone conversations. Secondly, in a bid to legitimise use of such devices, the government is contemplating to bring about an amendment to the existing law that put legal barriers to telephone tapping.

The home ministry's persistence with such an agenda makes one sit up and take note of the consequences that are likely to follow. Earlier, there was an attempt at empowering intelligence agencies to listen in on telephone conversations which had to be abandoned in the face of teething opposition from the civil society. Thereafter, the home and telecommunications ministries' move to procure the listening devices for law enforcers was eschewed because it met with a modicum of opposition from within. A number of cabinet members didn't go along with the idea.

The revival of the agenda, therefore, is to be looked at with trepidation. As it is, some intelligence agencies have long been covertly using the interceptors. An amendment to the Telecommunications Act 2001 which prohibits tapping on telephone conversations as an invasion on the privacy of citizens could only open the floodgate for it.

We are aware of the rising incidence and complexity of modern-day crimes and terrorist acts. This may necessitate keeping tabs on trends, but that human intelligence is preferable to electronic tapping cannot be in question. The law, if amended, could lend itself to all sorts of abuse and violation of civil liberties. Given our partisan culture of distrust, the eavesdropping could lead to political victimisation. People may even be blackmailed.

This could, however, be allowed on an extremely limited scale but only under ethical supervision and duly authorised by a neutral body with reasons and justifications provided for it. After all, we are a democracy and certainly not looking to be a police state.

Indo-Pak dialogue

Baggage of history being lightened

THERE are reasons to be optimistic about the current round of talks between the two big South Asian neighbours. The present talks under the rubric of composite dialogue that includes Kashmir, apart from seven other subjects, is now underway at the secretary level, in Islamabad. The purpose of the dialogue is to explore modalities for confidence building and reducing escalation through misunderstanding.

The fact that both have relented from their respective hard stands, 'only Kashmir' for Pakistan and 'all issues' for India, the present position of the two South Asian rivals suggest that it is their head rather than their heart that is guiding their actions.

What is significant to us is that the two big powers have got down to talking about their conventional weapons alongside talks on nuclear risk reduction. While nuclear weapons are designed to attain a balance and provide some degree of strategic parity, its use in any interstate conflict is hardly a possibility. That is not so in the case of conventional weapons, which proliferate exactly because of this consideration.

That the two countries, one having the third largest military in the world and the other having one of the largest percentage of GDP expenditure on the military have decided to talk on their conventional arsenal, augurs well for the peoples of the two countries. While it would be premature to predict on the possible outcome of this particular aspect, it is heartening to note that it has featured in the dialogue in the first place, even if it is to, 'know each other's perspective,' to quote the Pakistan spokesmen.

It is also encouraging to note that the current CBM talks are being held in the backdrop of the recent talks between the two prime ministers in New Delhi that, to many observers, had very little cause for optimism because of the reiteration of their old positions on core issues.

We find it difficult to agree with those that do not credit the two as being responsible nuclear powers, although more needs to be done on the nuclear issue. However, we would like to think that all that has gone on in Islamabad in the last three days would help in reducing tensions and create conditions for further concrete discussions that would usher in an era of peace and harmony in the region.

MD MASUM BILLAH

THE last election under the caretaker government of Justice Latifur Rahman took place under unprecedented security and neutrality. But of late the main opposition demands its reform and several critics vehemently say that Justice Latifur Rahman has destroyed the caretaker government system. They did not like the mass transfer of officials after his assuming the office. But to make a free and fair election this transfer was absolutely necessary. The Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police of a district who are in their place of work for more than three or four years must have developed an understanding with the local people which may affect holding a free and fair election. This is why they were transferred.

Under Justice Latifur Rahman every voting centre was absolutely free from any kind of terrorism, mastani, anarchy and party influence. Voters came, cast their votes according to their own wishes. Agents of all parties were sitting in voting centres. They could not exercise any influence as the presiding officer was given absolute power. Security personnel were kept alert. Nobody was given any scope to create any kind of anarchy.

When the counting began, all the party agents were present including the observers and newsmen. In the presence of all these persons the presiding and polling officers counted the votes with absolute honesty. Nobody could do anything which might be taken as the fault of the caretaker government. Then the result was submitted duly signed by the presiding officer. The result was acceptable to the newsmen and observers. How the fictitious claim of changing the result is raised? Who would dare to change the result in that secured situation? Actually we never want to judge ourselves and

our deeds. During the reign of AL what happened in the country must be given a serious consideration. Terrorism reached its peak. The people of this country are traditionally religious minded. Many religious minded people were arrested about the sufferings of the people. The then mayor told the people of Dhaka city to bear the brunt of mosquito bite. So what's the headache of the common people to send a party to the power when they don't get any practical benefit from that party. We never try to give even a little consideration to it.

People get to the street and remain stranded hour after hour. No pragmatic steps were taken by the then government. People suffered a lot for the failure of electricity. People don't expect that any party or government would turn the country into a Sonar Bangla overnight. But they can understand the sincerity and effort of the government and the party. After assuming power any

party or government should give utmost priority to curbing terrorism, creating employment opportunities, containing illegal toll collection, stopping police oppression, producing electricity etc. Had these steps been taken by any government people must send the party to power next time. We never bother about these things. We just want to go to power. Why? People understand the motive.

The people of this country are poor but conscious. If they can continue their business and other activities unhindered, definitely they will give vote to the party which gave them the opportunity. This country has not yet seen this kind of party. People are hostages to the political parties. They give votes to a party finding no other alternative. What the country will gain through the change of caretaker government system or changing the government? Will the common people get peace, security or prosperity?

The post-71 generation



ZAFAR SOBHAN

DECEMBER 16 always brings to my mind the experiences and perspectives of the 71 generation who were shaped by the liberation war. I define the 71 generation as those who were old enough to experience the turmoil of the 1960s and the 1970s, and especially 1971 and 1975 and their aftermath, first-hand. For better or for worse, it has been this generation that has guided the affairs of the country since liberation.

I have noticed that many of the pieces that writers of this generation produce every December 16 have a similar tone to them. The pieces are almost all ritualistic disquisitions on where we have come to as a nation since 1971, and there is an almost uniform sense of disappointment running through them.

The authors begin with an inspiring depiction of the heroics and sacrifices and glories of the liberation war and how they had such high hopes for the future of the country, but this quickly gives way to the disillusionment of the present, as they look around and realise that their hopes and dreams remain unfulfilled, and that the country has fallen far short of the promise of that day when everything seemed possible.

Reading these pieces every year, I am reminded that for those of the 71 generation, the last thirty-three

years have been difficult ones, and that they do feel a profound sadness for their unfulfilled hopes and dreams, and that this is why they cannot help but look back on December 16 with sorrow as well as pride.

The differences between the 71 generation and the post-71 generation are never more apparent to me than when I read those pieces. I am reminded of the concluding lines to King Lear:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

I can still remember glancing through a letter that my father's close friend Prof. Mosharruf Hossain gave me to take to my father when he was recovering from heart surgery some years ago and being struck by the poignancy of his words.

Even today, sometimes his words come back to me as I think of the 71 generation and all that they have seen and experienced: "Remember how we used to dream of raising a brave new world in this hapless land of ours?"

Even those who have done well personally in the years since inde-

pendence--and there is no shortage of success stories--must be saddened by the state of the country as a whole.

So, I do understand the mixed emotions that the 71 generation feels on this day.

But I think that it is a little different for the post-71 generation.

I think as a generation we don't have that sense of crushing disillusionment. Things might not be all that we would want them to be, but frankly I can't really remember a time when things were all that much better than they are now--and I can certainly remember times when things were worse.

Don't get me wrong. There is much to bemoan about the state of the nation and those who read my column will know that bemoan them I regularly do.

In many ways, things are looking

place from the 71 generation to the post-71 generation in the corridors of power and at the commanding heights of the economy.

It's the most ironic of paradoxes. The very generation that brought us our greatest moment and that we will always look to with pride is the same generation that has been unable to vanquish its own demons and establish a stable and sustainable polity in post-independence Bangladesh.

The sixties and seventies--which were the crucible in which their identities were forged--were rough and brutal times in this country.

As bad as things might be now, and for all the stories we have been told on long winter nights, the post-71 generation really can't begin to comprehend how things were in those blood-soaked and terror-filled days.

The differences we see today

among the warring factions in the nation stem from those days--and that's why they are so intractable. That's why among the 71 generation there can be no compromise. There can never be forgiveness and reconciliation. There has been too much blood shed and too much hardship suffered.

The story of the 71 generation is a story of broken dreams and betrayals.

The post-71 generation lives in more prosaic times. We are more pragmatic and less emotional. More realistic and less ideological.

Not having experienced the struggle for independence first-hand, we do not have that same sense of ownership and patriotism with respect to the country that the 71 generation does.

The flip-side of our pragmatism and realism is that idealism and a sense of social responsibility are in short supply. As a generation we are irredeemably materialistic and self-seeking. This is the tenor of the times in which we live--and it is not a change for the better.

Many would look at the new generation of politicians and the growing nexus between crime and affairs of state, and scoff at the notion that redemption can possibly lie in the hands of a generation such as this.

Many would argue that, unmoored from the crucial formative experience of the liberation struggle that inspired a generation to devote their lives to building up the nation, the country will head into even greater turmoil in the years ahead, and that the passing of the torch from the hands of the 71 generation signals the beginning of the end.

They might not be wrong either. It would be another oversimplification to suggest that power passing to the post-71 generation will necessarily usher in an era of civility and cooperation. But what I am suggesting is that with the historical differences less prominent and the historical inequities less raw a compromise will at least be thinkable.

I retain the hope that the enduring legacy of the generational shift that is taking place in Bangladesh is that the ghosts of 1971 and its aftermath can finally be laid to rest, and that we can as a nation finally move out of the twilight and into the bright sunshine of a new day.

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STRAIGHT TALK

The post-71 generation lives in more prosaic times. We are more pragmatic and less emotional. More realistic and less ideological. Our feuds are not blood feuds, and our history is not one of ancient enmity and bitterness. Our differences are not matters of life and death. We are not committed to forever re-fighting the same old battles over and over again.

A shortsighted vision



KULDEEP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

A former Pakistan Air Chief who led a delegation of retired military officers to India a few days ago made a poignant remark at a farewell party in New Delhi. He said he wished those who left Pakistan after its formation had not done so because his country missed the texture of society it intended to have. Probably, he did not realise that theirs was not an easy choice. They had to leave because they were non-Muslims. When they locked their houses behind they thought they would return after things had settled down. There was no going back--this realisation came to them only when they saw two streams of human beings on the main Grand Trunk Road, one flowing towards India and the other towards Pakistan. Muslims went through the same traumatic experience. However, thousands of them have come back to the state, not Punjab but others. In contrast, there is hardly any Hindu in West Punjab. This is what makes India different despite all the onslaughts of Hinduism.

Non-Muslims would have stayed back in Pakistan if Qaide Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah's reinterpretation of the two-nation theory had been carried out. Its ethos became secularism, not religion. He said that Muslims ceased to be Muslims and Hindus ceased to be Hindus; they

were either Pakistanis or Indians. Mahatma Gandhi, in turn, declared that he would live in Pakistan and seek no visa to enter.

Gandhi was shot dead by the extremists and Jinnah was abandoned by similar elements and left dying as a disillusioned man. Both leaders who were at the helm of political affairs then did not envisage that the minorities would have to quit because of their religion in the country to which they belonged. Both were dejected when the migration began.

came here and some of ours who went here were then in the forefront. The problem between the two countries has got more aggravated over the years. What was once a Hindu-Muslim hiatus has now become the confrontation between India and Pakistan which are laced with nuclear missiles. Partition has failed to solve the basic problem of communal bias.

I see the same fires of prejudice burning in the two countries. Misinformation, misunderstanding or misinterpretation of religion is

beginning to build a case to restrict the contact. Although India is issuing 10,000 visas daily and Pakistan 8,000, they can go back to the old days when the flow of visitors from one country to the other was a trickle. This necessitates the implementation of decisions reached on some of the confidence building measures. Another round of composite talks that has begun now should see to it.

Kashmir is a symptom. The disease is bias. Even in the valley, fundamentalism has come to the

Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan has pursued secularism. The result is that ideologically the two countries stand poles apart. Musharraf says he is fighting fundamentalists. But he is also seeking their assistance for political purposes. His other problem is the jihadi elements in the military.

In truth, fundamentalists in both the countries are vitiating the atmosphere and stoking the fires of prejudice. The eruption in India is met with eruption in Pakistan. The demolition of Babri masjid is one example. What happened in its wake in Pakistan was equally vindictive when practically all the Hindu temples were damaged in retaliation.

Relations between New Delhi and Islamabad will not improve until fundamentalists are out of the reckoning. If Kashmir is the be-all-end-all for Pakistan, it can be solved only up to the point which has the support of the BJP. True, former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee deserves all the credit for having set the ball rolling in January this year. The Manmohan Singh government, I am sure, must be keeping the BJP in the picture behind the scenes. But the stage of assessing how far it is willing to concede on Kashmir is yet to come. What people on both sides should meanwhile do is to deepen contacts at every level so as to make it difficult for the governments to impose restrictions even when they want to.

I recall the talk I had with Jinnah in 1946 when he addressed the Law College at Lahore. I was then in the final year. I asked him what would happen in the subcontinent after the departure of the British because the hatred between Hindus and Muslims had reached a boiling point. He said: Some nations have killed millions of each other's and yet an enemy of today is a friend of tomorrow. That is history. Look at France and Germany which have fought each other for hundreds of years.

I wish that had come true in the subcontinent. We have fought three and a half wars and killed thousands. Retired military officers who grist to the hatred mill which is working all the time. Fundamentalists on both sides are set against communal harmony. The common man wants to bury the hatchet while keeping his identity intact. But fundamentalists on either side sabotage even the most altruistic initiative to span the distance between the two.

It is strange that the Pakistan government should want to take credit for its campaign against prejudice when the history it teaches in schools and colleges is partisan and begins with the advent of Muslim rule in India. What about the civilization of Mohenjodaro and

Baluchistan with the support of Musharraf. Even otherwise, he has close understanding with the religious elements which first approved of his presidency and now give empty threats that they will not tolerate his uniform beyond December 31.

The process of people meeting from the different fields in India and Pakistan has diluted religious fanaticism. But when Musharraf says "I am giving bilateralism a final chance in Kashmir" and when Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh declares that "all is not well" the atmosphere becomes heavy. It means that the two governments are

fore, pushing to the background what was once a nationalist movement. Syed Ali Shah Geelani's pre-eminence in the valley indicates that. The efforts made to solve Kashmir are welcome. If they are successful the two countries will benefit immensely. But we would be deluding ourselves about permanent peace if we fail in resolving to tackle bias.

Our priority should be to establish secularism on both sides. India has been lucky because leaders even after Nerhu made no compromise with communalism. The BJP which did was ousted lock, stock and barrel. In Pakistan no leader after

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BETWEEN THE LINES

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OPINION

No need for caretaker government reform

MD MASUM BILLAH

THE last election under the caretaker government of Justice Latifur Rahman took place under unprecedented security and neutrality. But of late the main opposition demands its reform and several critics vehemently say that Justice Latifur Rahman has destroyed the caretaker government system. They did not like the mass transfer of officials after his assuming the office. But to make a free and fair election this transfer was absolutely necessary. The Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police of a district who are in their place of work for more than three or four years must have developed an understanding with the local people which may affect holding a free and fair election. This is why they were transferred.

Under Justice Latifur Rahman every voting centre was absolutely free from any kind of terrorism,

leadership come under the same banner on any matter of national importance? So why this impractical proposal? When AL will be in the power BNP will say the same thing against the caretaker government. That does not mean that the caretaker government is not honest or election was not fair.

Critics say a national consensus government headed by a person of outstanding integrity should be chosen as the head of caretaker government? This is another utopian idea. Wasn't Justice Shahabuddin a person like this? Could he save himself totally either from the wrath of AL and BNP when the party interest mattered?

One critic says that it never occurred to his mind that Latifur Rahman would prove himself as a very shrewd player and performer. Holding the reins of responsibility in a tight grip he could harass and embarrass anybody he liked to. None could think that he would put

to shame the party which chose him as chief advisor of the caretaker government. What does it mean? The party selected him to work for them, they pretend? If it is so then why, they neutral? Finding no other alternative people vote to a party with many of its faults and limitations. People want economic emancipation and terrorism free country.

Don't blame the caretaker government. Try to do something for the country and for the people. People will vote you to power. Try to love the country like Mahathir Mohammad. Try to show something like Mahathir Mohammad. Try to lead the country from a poor state to an emerging tiger of Asia in respect of economy, industrial and agricultural development like Malaysia. It has become possible by the undisputed leadership of Mahathir Mohammad.

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