

Another arms haul

Need is to get at the bottom of it

THE members of Bangladesh Rifles seized a large quantity of arms and ammunition from a remote village in Bandarban district on Wednesday last, thus confirming the truth that the hilly region has become a base of operations for the gunrunners and smugglers. Similar arms recovery from the area has been reported at least three times since September.

The law enforcers certainly deserve a round of applause for their timely interception which led to the recovery of the combat grade weapons and ammunition. Such alertness on the part of the law enforcers is needed to contain arms smuggling which can have a lot to do with subversive activities within the country. But we have to get at the bottom of the problem to solve it on a permanent basis. First, the sources of supply of the arms which have been recovered from time to time have to be unearthed. Second, the purveyors or the middlemen have to be identified. Finally, the law enforcers must try to know the ultimate destinations of the consignments. The vital information about the arms and the dealers will help us determine the exact nature and purpose of the smuggling that we have been watching for a long time.

There is hardly any way to treat any such haul as an isolated or insignificant incident, given the location and quantity of the arms and ammunition that have been recovered so far. The law enforcers are doing their job, but it is still not known how many of the arms consignments have actually slipped through the surveillance net and reached the intended destinations. The thought is extremely disturbing, particularly because militancy in some form or the other exists in different parts of our region as a whole.

Obviously, such findings also raise the question of internal security. The presence of subversive elements in the country is no secret as quite a few incidents of bomb blasts took place in recent times. So arms smuggling into the country is something that can only further aggravate the brittle law and order situation. The law enforcers have to delve deeper into the matter and break the back of the entire racket involved in illegal arms trade.

Admission test crisis

We do not want to see a repeat every year

THE ordeal for the students, as well as their parents, to get admitted to a good school, it seems, will never end. The picture of the little girl sobbing in an examination room of a school and hundreds of parents waiting outside, on the first page of The Daily Star last Monday, sadly and clearly tells us the trauma and difficulties both go through at this time of the year. There is no respite to the ordeal or indication of significant changes in the system. But for how long should the parents and their toddlers be made to face such distress?

Lack of adequate number of schools where quality education is provided, in addition lack of enough seats in the existing schools make the plight of the parents even more acute. There have been repeated pleas from various corners to bring a proper system in the admission process. Allegations of irregularities, corruption in the admission process at the government schools have been abounding over the years. We all hoped that the authorities would take some measures at least to minimise the predicament of the parents. And these days tendency of the parents to get their children admitted to an English medium school has only worsened the situation.

Taking advantage of it, many English medium schools are sprouting like mushrooms, in many areas, especially the affluent localities. And the fees in such schools are quite high. But we wonder whether quality education is ensured by these novices in the arena. We would like to know from the authorities whether they conduct any routine inspections so that the parents are not deceived.

And now, according to reports, many schools are flouting rules by holding admission tests before completion of the final examinations. Naturally those students changing schools are likely to fare badly in both the examinations. But do the school authorities really care? They are, as reported, more careful about 'complete vacation for the teachers and staff after final exams'. They also, through this process, want to ensure 'optimum number of students for the upcoming year' even if it means not doing well in exams for the students.

We simply hope that the education ministry would take necessary actions, as promised by the State Minister for Education, against the schools who turn a blind eye to the genuine problems of the students and their guardians.

Cracks in the secular facade of Netherlands



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

RECENT weeks have not been kind to the soft multi-ethnic image of Europe. Fissures have appeared in many parts of Europe, at odds with the usual picture of calm and cooperation. The spirit of tolerance that has always characterised social interaction has been badly dented through violence. Some headlines have also suggested that the dreaded clash of civilisations has finally arrived.

The spark was lit in the city of Amsterdam and then swiftly spread to the Hague, Netherlands -- otherwise known for being the bastion of law and order.

Home to the Peace Palace, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, the citizens of this beautiful country, have always been proud of their intellectual heritage. Netherlands has been a tolerant society for many centuries. Erasmus and Spinoza have been symbols of a rational but liberal and flexible approach towards the philosophical context of living.

Their committed attitude against political violence was further integrated into their social framework after the sad annihilation of 130,000 Dutch Jews at Auschwitz and Sobibor by the Nazis during the Second World War. This basic tenet of being against persecution also prompted Netherlands to receive and give permanent residence to more than a million Muslims -- almost six percent of its total population. This happened despite the fact that this is Europe's most densely populated country.

Despite this liberal approach, Dutch society, in recent weeks, has been thrown upside down with the gory killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh. His film documentary 'Submission', dealing with the treatment of women in Islam had raised serious controversy on the manner in which the subject had been treated in the film. Many Muslims considered this portrayal as blasphemous. Mr Theo van Gogh was murdered allegedly by a Muslim and a note was affixed to his shirt

between Muslims and Christians, between religious fundamentalism and secularism -- are also unfolding inside individual communities and countries on a smaller but still dangerous scale.

There appears to be some merit in McGuire's comments. Nevertheless, they are not completely acceptable.

It is true that integration of immigrants needs to take place within the host community, particularly if it relates to persons with different

community. However, there appears to have been minimum effort to integrate the immigrants into the Dutch way of living or to try to really understand their sensitivities. It now appears that while separate religious schools were liberally funded in keeping with human rights, very little was done to absorb or be aware of the delicate nuances of different faiths that guide inter-action between various communities.

Awareness or respect for other

arising out of such economic under-achievement, eventually also impairs cohesion within society.

The last two years have seen growth of unemployment in Europe. This has also had an indirect effect on racial harmony between the host community and the immigrant population. Radicalisation of the environment has also taken place, because most of those affected in economic terms, are immigrants, and the majority of

has to learn to accommodate Muslims, who take their faith seriously. This attitude has to evolve into the European psyche. Otherwise, it might become even more difficult in the future when Turkey joins the European Union with its 68 million Muslims.

What has happened in Holland in the recent past, is a reflection of the anxiety that prevails throughout Europe. The central question that is facing millions of Europeans today is, how to adapt themselves and their highly secular attitudes to the conservative brand of Islam from North Africa.

The French have already stirred the pot by banning the wearing of headscarves or other 'conspicuous' religious symbols in state schools. They have done this to retain a secular vision of social life.

Several political groups across Europe have also asked for more stringent rules to guide immigration. In a knee-jerk reflex, Muslim radio stations and Web sites have been shut down by the Dutch Parliament. Sadly, it has not been understood that such measures will be seen by the immigrant Muslim community as another example of denial of their rights. It is also unlikely to contribute to the eradication of terrorist prone Islamic groups. It might instead force dissent into the underground.

What is required is calm. Netherlands is a great country which has been associated over time with many poverty and development related issues in Muslim countries. They have always been responsive to the needs arising out of underdevelopment. This factor must not be missed by the Muslims. I believe that time has now come for Muslim Associations in Europe to play a more inter-active and positive role in restoring good-will and better understanding within Netherlands. The Dutch government should also take a step back and try to associate Islamic social workers in their effort to bring back stability. Just adopting a hard response might not work.

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POST BREAKFAST

What is required is calm. Netherlands is a great country which has been associated over time with many poverty and development related issues in Muslim countries. They have always been responsive to the needs arising out of underdevelopment. This factor must not be missed by the Muslims. I believe that time has now come for Muslim Associations in Europe to play a more inter-active and positive role in restoring good-will and better understanding within Netherlands.

proclaiming Jihad against Holland, Europe and the United States. It immediately became part of the terrible chain stretching from the World Trade Centre and Bali to Madrid.

This was a mindless and terrible act, but it set forth a spiral of violence. Several Dutch-Moroccan Muslims were arrested under anti-terrorism laws. The tragedy did not stop there. A Moroccan immigrant was killed in the town of Breda. Attacks on mosques and Muslim schools took place. This is turn, led to retaliatory attacks on Protestant churches.

These events have sent shock waves through the European Union.

In simplistic terms, analysts observed that the violence was clear evidence of immigration not having been handled properly. They, in more than one publication, concluded that immigration had become a destabilising force. Stryker McGuire writing in the 'Newsweek' took it to another level. He commented that 'it underscores the fact that the clashes of civilisation taking place at the global level --

social, cultural and religious backgrounds. However, the outbreak of violence in Holland needs to be seen from a broader perspective.

Europe (including Holland, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and the UK) has been under strain for some time. The events of 9/11, and subsequent anti-terror steps have created communication gaps. The continuing war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the failure to find a solution to the Palestinian problem, have all been exploited by certain sections for their own ends. This has added to the bitterness and suspicion and has made it that much more difficult in many European cities to live side by side with people of different cultures. This has been reflected in tension in Rome, Milan, Paris, Brussels etc. This is turn, has been seized by opportunist political elements who have tried to inflame extreme nationalist passions.

The Dutch government's approach towards immigration over the last decade, has been one of support for the immigrant communities might have then persuaded Mr van Gogh to desist from making such a controversial film. In every faith, there are sensitive aspects which can be discussed without being portrayed in the negative sense and that is what should have been done.

There are for example, certain rituals among conservative and orthodox followers of Judaism or Hinduism which have raised questions among many. Despite that, it is their approach to their belief, and this needs to be respected. Every community needs to be permitted to practise any ritual as long as the secular aspects of law are not broken. They should not be made targets for ridicule.

Immigrant population anywhere, particularly the first generation, suffer from psychological pressures of the 'glass-ceiling complex'. It takes time to be accepted and to be successful. In the meantime, immigrants have to swim against the tide. This impacts on the immigrant and might create a ghetto mentality. Social seclusion

then are of Muslim faith. This scenario is generating its own dynamics among the Muslims community all over Europe this has also assumed particular importance as Muslims now constitute seven percent of the population in France, about six percent in Holland and nearly three percent in Britain, Belgium, Denmark and Sweden. It has not affected Norway, Finland or Ireland that much, as less than one percent of their population is Muslim.

Racial tension has been brewing in Holland since 2002. The national elections held there, that year, saw immigration taking centre-stage as an issue. Dutch populist politician Pim Fortuyn called for Netherlands to re-think its policies towards continued immigration and this enhanced his party's popularity. This debatable nationalistic posture faced serious opposition from human rights activists and eventually resulted in his unfortunate assassination in the hands of an environmentalist.

Whether Europe likes it or not, it

it depends on the quality of performance of the commission. It may be stated in this regard that the conscious citizens of Bangladesh could not expect anything better than the present set up of ACC because the present government not only cannot trust the members of the opposition, it hardly trusts its own capability. Needless to say that it must show less importance on politicisation if it at all aims at showing better performance in future.

The commission has started to

OPINION

Anti-corruption Commission: Can it be a deterrent?

ABMS ZAHUR

CORRUPTION has become an enduring pattern of our public life. It is posing a threat to our nascent democracy. It is obstructing the operation of market forces, creating bottlenecks in administrative process, preventing justice and fairness, dampening the spirit of public service and impeding sustainable development. Multilateral donor agencies such as World Bank and UNDP estimate that 30 to 40 percent of development fund of Bangladesh are siphoned off by corrupt means. In fact, corruption has become synonymous to misgovernance in Bangladesh. We may consider the rating of Transparency International as the most corrupt country in the world as a bit exaggerated. But we have to admit that pervasive corruption is stagnating governance of the country. The unbundling of selected types of corruption reveals the extent of bribery in connection with public utilities, in public procurement and in the illicit 'purchase of laws and regulations'. The surveys of the World Bank, TIB and other surveys show how much acute is corruption in customs, income tax, police, lower judiciary, transport and city governance.

Corruption in the financial sector is glaring. Political corruption in obtaining nominations, bribing party leaders and segments of people in the electoral arena is

to be pro-BNP. This cannot, however, be a disqualification for their selection. But this exposes to an extent 'intention of the present government'. This is unfortunate that even the donor agencies have clearly stated that it is not dearth of resource it is rather the weakness of institutions which is responsible for slow growth of Bangladesh economy. So long as the current politicisation continues the alliance government will never be able to build up any strong institution.

It is always better to start something than to sit idle and waste time brooding. We have reached a stage where, perhaps, our economy cannot withstand any more delay. The setting up of the commission may not be the best option. At least it is a beginning. Despite defects and deficiencies in the commission we may not be totally disappointed if the government as well as the opposition allow it to work smoothly and courageously so that it is not regarded as the poor substitute of the defunct BAC.

engage in bribery and graft they can be called to account by an independent and honest judiciary or anti-corruption commission.

At last the government has been able to set up a three-member anti-corruption commission under the chairmanship of justice Sultan Hossain Khan, a former high court judge. The two other members on the commission are Muniruzzaman Mia and Muniruddin Ahmed, a former vice chancellor of Dhaka University and a former chairman of Securities and Exchange Commission, respectively. All the members of the commission are reported

Politicisation has already made the weak and inefficient bureaucracy almost non-functional.

In a branded corrupt country like Bangladesh how can we expect that a commission consisting of three pro-BNP members and headed by an octogenarian retired high court judge will be able to handle the stupendous task of controlling corruption in Bangladesh? It is difficult for us to believe that such members can take strong decision unpalatable to either BNP or the alliance government.

The commission declares that it would be able to bring significant

ble change in handling the cases of corruption. We are told that budgetary control of the commission will not be under the executive branch. This is hope inspiring. However, it is not clear as to how the commission can show better performance if it is advised by the officers of the former BAC, a static department. There is strong possibility that it would turn out to be old wine in a new bottle. We may even apprehend a worse situation (creation of more confusion).

We do not know the extent of satisfaction of the donor agencies in the establishment of the commis-

work. All the officers and staff of the defunct BAC have been asked by the commission to submit the statements of their individual assets on the day of joining the ACC within a month. This step may control the cases of graft of these personnel for future. But what about their past records. Can we assume that all the personnel of the former BAC are free from corruption. On the other hand, if a substantial number of them have dubious record or have ill reputation, can we expect that some magic wand of the commission will turn them into angels? The government must think about it seriously if

it sincerely desires to control corruption drastically.

The relationship between the ACC and the TIB may be carefully spelt out. Otherwise there might be chaos and confusion. It needs also to be stated as to the accountability of the commission. It may be seen whether it can be made accountable directly to the parliament. Only such step can really make the commission independent.

It is always better to start something than to sit idle and waste time brooding. We have reached a stage where, perhaps, our economy cannot withstand any more delay. The setting up of the commission may not be the best option. At least it is a beginning. Despite defects and deficiencies in the commission we may not be totally disappointed if the government as well as the opposition fully support the commission and allow it to work smoothly, coolly and courageously so that it is not regarded as the poor substitute of the defunct BAC, a vehicle for pursuing personal and political vendettas and a source of delay and inefficiency.

ABMS Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

What is happening in the city?

Things are getting worse day by day in the city. I am talking about Palashi intersection, one of the many places in the city that the city bosses have earmarked for better movement of vehicles. For about four years, I have been moving through this place, but I have never seen such a disgusting stalemate, except during the four occasions of Pahela Baisakh that I experienced. Five automatic signal systems have been activated here recently in addition to deployment of four traffic police personnel. But the result has not been very different. I have never waited even for a single minute in this place, but now I have to wait for about 4-5 minutes to cross it. So, what is the outcome of the investment for installation of these automatic signal systems? What is actually happening in the

city? What are the traffic managers doing? What kind of study had they conducted for this type of investment here? Let's not hear from them, after some time, that the rickshaw is the main culprit for this congestion.

We surely had a better situation previously. Let's have a realistic thought before initialising such improvement plans, which often turn out to be rather counter productive.

Shuvro, On e-mail

Human chain

It is good to see that our politicians are responding to the common disgust against hartal and coming up with new ideas. The human chain was a welcome break from the usual hartal culture. The government should have restrained its followers. The attack on a peaceful demonstration was unfortunate. The opposi-

tion should devise more new methods of protest that do not hamper everyday activities.

Saif, Dhaka

Bangladesh cricket team

What has happened to our national cricket team? Is it an 'act of fate' that the Bangladesh cricket team is losing again and again and that too by a big margin against almost all the teams? I do not want to sound too drastic, but just listen, my fellow players in the team: I really do not have time, neither does everyone else (some of us have to sweat hard to pass finals), but we carry on giving our time and support to the team. To see an improvement is all we look for, maybe a draw, maybe batting into the 5th day or maybe even playing a good game of catch! I am not saying everyone is doing

badly, we actually have a very good line-up on paper, but for some odd reason no one seems to work collectively. That's all. Excuse me, I have to hit the books, must work, but please ponder on this for just a moment. On our last session the number 10 batsman scored more runs than 4 of the 5 top order batsmen for Bangladesh combined... no jokes, seriously...

Arifur Monty Rahman
North York, Ontario

Misleading cults

There was a time when mostly illiterate, uneducated and less advanced people depended on luck in the hope of better life. But these days because of fear of ill luck, frustration, emotional instability that are increasing alarmingly in our society, it is very often seen that even highly qualified and modern people are consulting mystics and

fortune tellers for averting catastrophe. Many religious cults are flourishing all over the country as it was in middle age. And these so-called powerful cult leaders are successfully misleading the masses. Tricks are being played on believers by them and they assure people that there are lots of mantra, charms and prayers available to them for preventing any kind of calamity. Though there is virtually no scientific ground to confirm or deny it, belief is getting more powerful than reason. And these religious cults are giving birth to fanaticism and prejudice.

Rubab Abdullah
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

Weeding out corruption

We are all ashamed for our country has been dubbed as the most cor-

rupt nation in the world for the fourth time. Transparency International (TI) is a Berlin-based organisation having a local chapter who are engaged in observation, interviews, and data surveys.

Japan is a homogeneous society and so is Bangladesh! Japan is frequently battered by the typhoons as Bangladesh undergoes cyclones and storms. Japan is the second largest economy in the world with a trillion dollars foreign currency reserves. From 1991 to 2001, Japan underwent their longest period of recession and they spent 500 billion dollars during the said decade to overcome the recession -- the government and opposition worked hard and finally got rid of the recession from their economic cycle.

Being internationally recognised, now we are also having a disorder cycle! To weed out corruption, the Planning Commission, Pay Com-

mission, Chambers of Commerce & Industry and trade & professional associations should individually and collectively work to remove the anomalies and discrepancies.

Gohar Ashraf
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Opposition goes the right way

At last the opposition started following the right way to protest against corruption in the government. In our country opposition parties tried to make us believe that 'Hartal' is the most effective way to protest. But people always rejected this idea. The successful human chain from Teknaf to Tetulia indicates that opposition parties started to respond to the demand of the people. In this country more than seventy percent people are against hartal but still politicians

call it. Hartal produces terrorists. Hartal is always enforced by pickets and not observed by people. Pickets often use bombs, burn cars, destroy shops and others properties etc. These activities are clearly terrorism and when hartal enforcers are behind these kind of terrorism it is likely that terrorism will increase in the country. Hartal does little harm to the government and is dangerous for the people and for the economy. So in my opinion whoever calls hartal is against the people and is promoting terrorism. Another important point is that before changing the government we should find out honest people who will run it in future. If we replace one corrupt regime by another, the end result will be a big zero.

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