Christianity and Islam is no less

than a clash of civilizations -- the

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Hartal into the second day Focus must be on effective investigation

S a shell-shocked Awami League and its allies observe the 60-hour non-stop hartal across the country, tension is running high over the volatile political situation following the brutal murders of SAMS Kibria and four others. The hartal has been extended to 60-hours, though the original plan was to call it for a day.

There has been an avalanche of condemnation, mostly laced with an outright rejection of the government's position on the investigations carried out into the series of bomb blasts in recent times. The distinguished envoys from the EU and other countries have made it known that they are not only extremely shocked by the incident but also unhappy with the government's 'apparent failure' to get to the bottom of previous bomb attacks. In fact, there is an absolute consensus on the point that the unresolved cases have emboldened the killers to launch such attacks on eminent public figures. So, the world is watching Bangladesh and the failure to punish the perpetrators of some of the worst political crimes in our history is sending negative signals about our image overseas. The envoys have appealed to the government for transparent investigation and 'swift action' which could only mean bringing the killers to justice as a matter of utmost priority. The onus is on the

We believe that the focus should be on the demand for a time-bound, result-oriented, impartial and transparent investigation into the Habiganj grenade attack. The opposition has to retain the full measure of public sympathy to pressurize the government into conducting effective investigation into the attacks. A long-drawn hartal can stand in the way of a full expression of public outrage as it shuts off everything. Street violence and other ways of giving vent to the anguish and frustration, however highpitch the sentiments are, might shift the focus away from the primacy of investigations.

On the other hand, it is highly imperative for the government to ensure that police brutalisation and hamhanded treatment of opposition activists are scrupulously avoided.

EU's helping hand A shot in the arm of RMG sector

HE post-MFA challenge facing Bangladesh's garments sector has triggered mixed reflexive responses from industry leaders and trade scenario watchers with optimism generally outstripping skepticism. Part of the positivism stems from a felt need to keep the morale high, but largely it seems grounded in assured demands and orders for our readymade apparels in the traditional markets overseas for sometime to

At a time like this, it's music to our ears that the European Union (EU) has decided to accord duty-free access to the Saarc LDCs in order that they are able to face the post-MFA challenges. Under the new GSP facility taking effect from July this year, the Bangladesh garments industry will be able to use fabrics and raw materials from the Saarc and Asean countries. The particularly helpful part of the access to the 25-nation European market is going to be the local value addition content varying from zero to 25 per cent in place of the present value addition requirement for the EU market of 51 per cent.

This is a booster dose of support from the EU that we very much appreciate, and would at the same time urge the US to extend in the near future.

The best practical approach of enduring quality for our garments manufacturers and exporters, however, would be to enhance local value addition to the manufacturing processes by setting up strings of backward linkage industries. We have been trying to do it for the last five years, but the pace of attainment of self-reliance leaves room for acceleration in this vital area.

The government has made a budgetary allocation for crisis management in the event of closures of smaller industries and retrenchment of employees. While the safety-net approach is welcome, although the provision might prove inadequate in the end, the government might prove inadequate in the end, the government would do well to incentivise investment in building backward linkage industries.

Competitiveness of our garments products is as much a function of cost efficiency as it is that of gaining lead-time through port efficiency ensured by speeded up clearance formalities. While the government consciously creates an enabling environment for the garments business to thrive in the post-MFA era, the industry leaders for their part must strive to remain in the try leaders for their part must strive to remain in the reckoning by complying with other standards set by major importing countries.

Keeping off from extremists

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

REDICTABLY Bangladesh authorities have dismissed Eliza Griswold's report in New York Times (January 23, 2005) raising the possibility of Bangladesh giving birth to the next Islamist revolution. Griswold wrote about the alleged attempts by Bangla Bhai to bring about Talibanisation in some parts of the country bordering India through violent means. In Griswold's eyes Bangladesh politics have never strayed far from violence and thuggery has been a constant feature of Bangladesh politics and is increasingly so today. ÉTraveling through Bangladesh she concludes "The global war on terror is aimed at making the rise of regimes like that of the Talibans impossible, in Bangladesh the trend could be going the other way"

Bangladesh authorities found the report "baseless, partial and misleading" and reiterated the government's commitment to democracy. The dismissal of Griswold's report notwithstanding Bangladeshi media continues reporting on the defiance and violence perpetrated by Bangla Bhai and his cohorts of Jagrata Muslim Janata Banglaesh (JMJB) under the nose of the governmental authorities and of the government's inability to arrest Bangla Bhai despite the orders of the Prime Minister that he be arrested. The press has also questioned the sincerity of the government to arrest Bangla Bhai.

It is not the first time that Bangladeshi authorities have been upbraided by domestic and foreign media and institutions for their inability to contain the virus of

religious intolerance and for its increase in recent days. Eliza Griswold hazards a guess that it could be because the government is 'in any case divided on precisely the question on how much Islam and politics should mix". Section of western and foreign press warned about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and alleged of sanctuaries being given to transnational Islamist elements. Zeal of the Islamic fundamentalists found expression in the Friday sermon of the head priest of a prominent mosque at Dhaka accusing President Bush of being a "terrorist" while addressing a gathering of erners. Though the literal meaning of madrasa is a "school" it is generally used for offering instructions on Islamic subjects including the Holy Quran, the Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence and law. Since many madrasas offer free education, room and board to their students they appeal to impoverished families. Most madrasas are used to educate male students while a few also impart education to girls. Since madrasa education does not carry much financial benefits in a labour market demanding nonecclesiastical skills the students graduating from madrasas are

report by the Congressional Research Service (International Terrorism in South Asia) states that among the approximately ten thousand madrasas in Pakistan some have been implicated in teaching militant anti-western, anti-American and anti-Hindu values. Many of these madrasas are financed and operated by Pakistani Islamist political parties and foreign entities.

Foremost US analyst on South Asia Stephen Cohen states that the largest Islamic sects with the greatest control over religious schools are the Deobandis (as opposed to forced to become madrasa teachers , the Barlevis) who are among the

Asia Ambassador Cofer Black, State Department coordinator for counter terrorism spoke of Indian allegations relating to terrorist camps in Bangladesh (denied by Bangladesh authorities) and of the "need to determine exactly the threat not only to Bangladesh but also the potential utilisation of Bangladesh as a platform to project terrorism internationally". Noted Indian journalist Prem Shankar Tha felt that the 8/21 assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina was possible due to a combination of political expediency and ambivalence over whether to ride the tiger

perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the world wide expansion of both", then the Islamic world would have to adorn itself with all the traits of modernity. Globalization is no longer a choice; it is a reality that all countries have to deal with. In this game the West has a decided advantage over the Muslim world, particularly the least developed among them. Countries like Bangladesh will

remain dependent on the developed economies and international financial institutions if they are to transform their societies into more advanced ones. This quest is fraught with difficulties that should not be further compounded by inviting religious extremism, however politically expedient such a move may seem to be. It would be prudent to remind

ourselves of the remarkable observation by James Freeman Clark: the difference between a politician and a statesman is that a politician thinks of the next election and a statesman thinks of the next generation. Those persons who hold the destiny of our nation in their hands may wish to remind themselves of the fact that power is transient and should be used wisely. Extremists of the Right and totalitarians of the Leftboth are harmful for Bangladesh. In these days of "cross fire" sooner people like Bangla Bhai are arrested and tried in a court of law the better it will be for Bangladeshis at home and abroad.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and

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people who had gone to the mosque to offer their prayer, branding two judges of the High Court as enemies of Islam because they had suo moto given a judgment declaring illegal religious edicts passed by village priests, and declaring a prominent lawyer of the country as "murtad" because he was defending in a court of law a case on behalf of the Ahmadiyya community who are being persecuted by religious zealots.

While tracing the antecedents of Bangla Bhai it was revealed that he was a product of a madrasa or religious school. After 9/11 terrorist attacks madrasas have generated intense interest among the westor priests in mosques. Coming from impoverished families they are forced back into poverty in a world racing for material advancement.

be further compounded by inviting religious extremism.

This vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation may find expression in anti-western feeling particularly in the aftermath of the decimation of Afghanistan and the illegal invasion of Iraq. Many madrasa students may find it difficult to understand the venality of the Taliban regime and of their link in the 9/11 carnage necessitating regime change in Afghanistan. To many of them Osama bin Laden is a hero. Understandably the US Congress keeps itself informed of the madrasa education in South Asia. A

Zia ul Hug's Islamic zealotry in no way represents a rejection of the limited strategy of using radical Islamic groups as instruments of Pakistani foreign policy, especially against India. This tour d'horizon of Pakistani religious extremism was necessary because terrorism, particularly religious terrorism, is

most militant in their demand for

Pakistan to become truly Islamic.

Incidentally Deobandi groups were

in the forefront of declaring

Ahmadiyyas as non-Muslim in

Pakistan. Cohen believes that the

reaction of Parvez Musharraf's

generation of army officers against

almost always transnational. During his latest visit to South centuries old rivalry between

mented by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and US State Department, among others, should be seen in global context. If the Muslims are to prove historian Bernard Lewis wrong that "Islam was never prepared, either in theory or in practice, to accord full equality to those who held other forms of worship, and that the

of religious intolerance or to con-

front it". He warned against the

propagation of "an intolerant

arabicised brand of Islam that was

alien to Bangladesh's secular cul-

The emergence of religious

intolerance in Bangladesh, docu-

Disaster issue must be high in SAARC summit



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

T is a matter of common knowledge that South Asia along with its adjacent region like the South East Asia is a disasterprone area and countries here have had enough of the onslaughts of natural disasters of severe proportion in recent history. Catastrophic floods, storms, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes and other colossal problems caused by the whims of nature are a regular phenomenon in this part of the world. Even with remarkable advancement of science and technology, man is broadly helpless in the face of fury of nature, but effective and timely application of technology can certainly minimise the consequences of such effects. Early warning system, adequate pre-calamity preparedness and speedy post-disaster management system are some of the measures that can definitely reduce the chances and more importantly lessen scale of devastation likely to be wrought by disasters. It is not that these possibilities are not being thought of or efforts are not being made in this line to save the calamity-prone nations as far as possible. But what is urgently felt is more serious bid in that direction on the basis of utmost priority and placement of resources even if there is constraint on part of the countries desperately needing protection from natural disasters. It appears that such a drive is somewhat lacking even though there is no dearth

talks of probable steps to mitigate the causes and consequences. The tsunami tragedy has brought

to the fore once again the dire need of anti-disaster measures on a regional plane. This has received particular attention since the occurrence of unimaginable magnitude taking lives of a quarter million hapless people in South and South East Asia took place just before the earlier scheduled early January13" summit of the leaders of seven south Asian countries. The tsunami that struck mainly three South and two and it is more so when the coming summit is expected to take up a number of matters crucially important to the welfare and benefit of the 1.4 billion people living in the region. It is heartening to note that the conference of the heads of government is taking place at the earliest possible time following the deferment.

However, there was another line of thinking on the issue of postponing the event. Some quarters felt that the issue relating to natural calamities in South Asia would

come out on the subject, which, however, is daunting in nature.

Bangladesh is vulnerable to natural disasters and we terribly experienced these happenings highlighted by the catastrophes of 1970,1988,1998 and other occasions. Ours is country often described as calamity prone by the international world. The recent world conference on disaster management in Kobe, Japan, focused especially on the handicaps caused by nature on such nations. The leader of the Bangladesh delega-

of anxiety and concern as well as of enthusiasm and preparedness Hopefully, something concrete will individual nations as well as collec-

It goes without saying that a venture like disaster prevention in South Asia needs collective endeavour, and larger international support and assistance are also required for the purpose. It can be concluded that international help will not be absent as evidenced by the fact that the sympathy demonstrated in the aftermath of Asia's fsunami was more appealng in the Western nations, particularly among their peoples, whose hearts went out in consolation with

large did not play the kind of role expected in such a situation in encouraging the people of all spheres of life to mingle with this great human tragedy although some scattered initiatives by organisations like NGOs or others and some leading persons of different professions were certainly commendable. The government also dispatched relief to some affected countries. But the nation as a whole did not seem to have the severity of the devastation in the countries which are all friendly nations -- fellow South Asians and South East Asians including the population wise largest Muslim country. Furthermore, we ourselves are a disaster prone nation and the tsunami definitely narrowly spared this country. Had it been hit, the destruction could be of unimaginable proportions. Our response to the situation needs introspection and soul-searching. Our capacity is limited but why there should be dearth of sufficient feelings and sympathy? Newspapers and TV of many countries including some in the neighbourhood helped sensitising public response to this demanding situation.

The Kobe conference has thrown up several effective ideas for disaster prevention and mitigating consequences including effective early warning system. The SAARC summit coming within weeks of this event and against the fresh tsunami background must devote itself concretely on the disaster issue which is inextricably linked with the fate of the region where countless perish and huge properties get destroyed at regular intervals by whims of nature. The summit will hopefully shed enough light on the issue, which is enormously and critically important for South Asia.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

MATTERS AROUND US

We ourselves are a disaster prone nation and the tsunami definitely narrowly spared this country. Had it been hit, the destruction could be of unimaginable proportions. Our response to the situation needs introspection and soul-searching. Our capacity is limited but why there should be dearth of sufficient feelings and sympathy? Newspapers and TV of many countries including some in the neighbourhood helped sensitising public response to this demanding situation.

South East Asian nations on December 26 leaving a trail of devastation postponed the summit which is now rescheduled to be held early February. Indeed, such a postponement was the logical development to the situation caused by the disaster. In the past SAARC summits had been deferred several times owing to man-made crises like political problems among the member states and hence there was no reason why the event should not be called off temporarily when nature inflicted severe blow on three of its seven members and friendly nations of nearby area. The nations affected by the disaster obviously needed to devote on domestic relief operations at that critical hour of tragedy. Then again the summit should not remain hanging for long since this may lead to loss

have received highest priority had the summit taken place on the scheduled dates close on the heels of the tsunami tragedy without disputing the fact that for the affected nations the time might not have been convenient for the event. Arguably, there is a point in such thinking even though the rescheduling has been largely justified. The ASEAN had no scheduled meeting but gathered in quick time at different levels to discuss the situation caused to its two members and the region. It is expected that this sense of highest priority surrounding serious regional approach in containing or mitigating disasters as far as possible will not be lost in the proceedings of the 13" summit. This has already been made clear that the matter will be very much in the agenda and this is a good augury.

tion, flood and disaster management minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, had the rare honour of presenting one of two keynote papers in the large and important gathering participated by world's most countries and opened by no less a person than the Emperor of Japan in a rare gesture. The other keynote presenter was former chief of the UNHCR Dr. Sadako Ogata. It was a high profile event drawing worldwide attention and the Bangladesh delegation and its suggestions in the relevant fields were well received by participating countries. The SAARC summit in Bangladesh capital coming almost in quick succession of that global conference may also pick up the thread from that conference suiting the regional requirement and priorities. This will be beneficial for

of powerful nations were criticised by their people and the press for either not acting immediately or acting inadequately for the calamity hit countries. School children, top celebrities of cinema and music world, sports figures and heads of government of some countries spared no efforts to stand by the suffering humanity. Comparatively many of the Asian countries lagged behind in this regard in contrast to Europe and several other nations. This is not a happy spectacle. Even in countries like ours the outpouring of sympathy for the tsunami victims has not been anything much praiseworthy.

the dead and affected in the South

and South East Asia. Some leaders

Unpalatable it may sound, one may say that even the media by and

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDIT

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. game, heroes of a bygone era may and those of the rest of the world to the nexus of vested interest that ideology of terror and justify the war govern, to say that the ruling BNP make a mountain out of a mole,

Bangla Bhai and revolution

I refer to the article published in the New York Times Magazine in its issue of January 23, 2005. The gist of the article is that initiatives such as Bangla Bhai's that propagate Islamic Fundamentalism is on the rise and moving fast to sponsor "The Next Islamist Revolution" in Bangladesh. The report is quite disturbing. It is disturbing for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the government's total inaction in curbing militancy and lawlessness in the name of religion is indeed deplorable. Secondly, presence of these rouge activities, how minor these may be, gives the Western media and a part of its intelligentsia enough space to berate Islam and demonize the countries where these acts continue unabated. It is on the latter that I wish to elaborate

These days, it has become fashionable for the Western media to especially if it concerns Islam. They simply would not let go off this subject. Perhaps it makes fine journalistic sense and more importantly, sounds a right chord with the western image of an ideological enemy -- presence of an ideological enemy, real or imaginary, is crucial for pursuing the capitalistic goals of the imperialists both at home as well as abroad.

The US economy is so much anchored on defense industry that it will always need an ideological enemy to create an ideology of terror to justify internally, enhanced defense budget and externally, increased arms sale. During the 60s to the mid 80s the so-called fear of communism and portraying of communists and communist regimes as ideological enemies were orchestrated to such a height that became quite handy to pave the way for arms build-up and massive sale of defense equipment, both at home and abroad. This suited well

existed and continue to exist, between the Administration and the manufacturers of defense equip-

However, the defense sector encountered slow run since the mid -eighties, especially after the collapse of the Soviet regime. This was disturbing, not only to the industry itself, but to the Administration as well, the latter was losing revenue from the arms it was selling in the name of combating communism, to its third world allies. Therefore, to revive the public support for the defense industry or what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky would term as, to support "Manufacturing Consent", a new ideological enemy that can contribute to an ideology of terror had to be created. The socalled Islamic fundamentalism fitted the shoes very beautifully. Saddam Hussein was not an Islamic Fundamentalist, but never mind he is a Muslim and was ruling a Muslim country - enough to hype up the followed by, among others, the push for building up of a modern Iraqi army! The Iraqi oil money will now end up in the same very country from where the main investment in the Iraq war came, the US. There are now other ready buyers among a host of "axis of willing"

Now about "Bangla Bhai" (BB). The guy is an absolute thug and needs to be brought to justice as soon as possible. But for an American journalist to see him as a milestone to an "Islamist Revolution" in Bangladesh is not only far fetched, but downright malicious. There is also no evidence to suggest that Bangla Bhai's activities are supported either by the ruling BNP or the Islamic parties. Though the government's(or local police forces'?) initial encouragement to BB's brigade to tackle communist militants and later, the ineptness of its police force to curb their activities deserve total condemnation and put to question its legitimacy to

and its coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami directly or indirectly supported BB to advance an Islamic Fundamentalist movement in the country is, to my mind, stretching the imagination too far. In this context, it may be interest-

ing to note how the Western intellectual discourse has changed its canvas over time. For example, Ms. Grisworld states in her article that Bangla Bhai formed his group to fight the communists. In another time, the same author would have hailed the guy as a hero and indeed, his work would have been acknowledged as a great contribution to humankind's search for liberty and freedom. Alas, times are different but not the fundamentals of the basic underpinnings of the Western vested interest, especially those of the US- the relentless search for opportunities to subsidize the ominant industry and in this case and as far as the US is concerned, the defense industry, is on. In this

look like a devil today. As far as the Western mind is concerned, there is nothing hypocritical about it. Any challenge to their political and economic dominance and the space needed to pursue that dominance must be advanced at all costs, by means fair or foul. Regrettably, it is more of the latter that the world has to cope with these days. Finally, if Ms. Grisworld is con-

cerned about rise of fundamentalism per se in Bangladesh, then I dare say that it is a monopoly neither of Bangladesh, nor of Islam. If recent trends are any guide, there indeed is a rise of Christian fundamentalism (or Evangelicalism) in the US itself and the stark difference between the two is that while the former(the Islamic one) is nothing but a response to defend itself against the economic, social and cultural assault of the West against its people and their countries, that of the latter is simply a State engineered act, aiming to influence its own citizens

bolster support to advance its hegemonic ambitions! Adil Khan

EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Brisbane, Australia

Bomb attacks at Sylhet

.....One can no longer call these criminals humans, when they are devoid of the slightest humaneHYENAS are what

Criminal activities at Sylhet have taken an alarming new turn in the recent months. The perpetrators are now sneaking away successfully, with perfectly synchronized bomb attacks. The enormity of such crimes need no description. Unpredictable and unfathomable, these incidents have been putting lives at risk every moment. What sickens and flabbergasts me most is that the perpetrators had no qualms to disrupt normal life at a region, that has been swamped by devastating flood so very recently. The city is still reeling under the after-effects of the unprecedented calamity. Doesn't the cries of thousands of flood victims, now homeless and jobless, touch their hearts, one tiny bit!

they have become!

And to add fuel to the fire, a madman had the audacity to give bomb threat at the Osmani International Airport, which later turned out to be a hoax. The caller I am sure had derived immense pleasure from the sheer chaos that his call had succeeded in creating at the three international airports across the

The incompetence of our law enforcement agencies is well known. Hence, I should not be termed a pessimist if I say the criminals will go unpunished ... and continue to loom large in this flawed world of ours. But they have not escaped "HIS" eyes...no one can.

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