

Why this political mudslinging?

Kibria murder investigation can get unfocussed

THE latest in recriminatory diatribe is exemplified by ruling party's secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan putting the blame for the death of SAMS Kibria squarely on the shoulders of the main opposition. Kibria's death was a tragic incident that rocked the nation and brought the government's credibility and sincerity in tackling these matters to question. But no sooner had Kibria died than the opposition jumped to accuse the ruling coalition of his killing. And now Abdul Mannan says that it is the Awami League that was responsible for Kibria's tragic death.

We cannot but detect in those utterances an attempt to mislead and confuse the people in the aftermath of the tragic incident. We fear that these utterances will do very little to help the course of the investigation.

Exploiting a tragic incident to gain political mileage and upping the ante against one's opponent is as much in bad taste as it is inappropriate. Yet that is what we notice with dismay, being done both by the government and the opposition in varying degrees. We can only express our disgust at the blame game and urge upon all concerned to exercise restraint and caution in their behaviour.

The point to remember here is that Kibria died of a direct attack on him, and according to many he might have lived had appropriate and timely medical aid been made available to him. It was for the government to ensure prompt treatment and in fact put its weight to bear on those they thought were standing in the way of prompt medical attention to Kibria. It was for the government to ensure that he was brought to where proper medical treatment was available, with the utmost celerity. That did not happen.

The fact, that such utterances, coming forth particularly from the custodian of law and order of the land, only help in derailing the course of the investigation, can hardly be overlooked. A look at the current state of investigations of the past incidents would validate the point we are making.

As for the government it would do well to devote its energy in unearthing the perpetrators of these dastardly acts instead of indulging in what happens to be diversionary statements.

Infrastructural link with Yangon

A bridge-head to the East

IT is good to know that Bangladesh and Myanmar have decided on a route for the much-awaited road-link between Dhaka and Yangon and that most other technical aspects of the project have been finalised. The originally proposed route through Mongdu and Buhtidaung to have a direct road link between Dhaka and Yangon has been replaced, after due consideration, by a newly envisioned route from Ramu in Cox's Bazar to Kyauktwa in Myanmar.

The 130-kilometre road is being laid not merely to connect Myanmar but also as part of road links encompassing neighbouring Thailand, China and other East Asian countries.

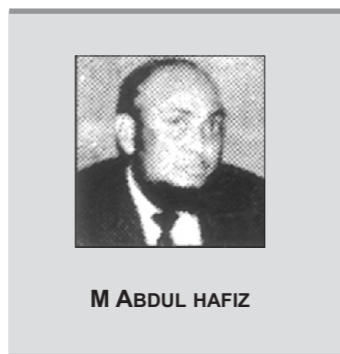
One crucial part of the undertaking would be a 20-kilometre road linkup with the main route of the Asian highway. Bangladesh is to assist Myanmar in laying the road in its own interest; otherwise, the Trans-Asian highway would go through India bypassing Bangladesh.

This joint venture project at an estimated total cost of Tk 136.34crore on materialisation would be the first major stride the two countries will have made towards expanding bilateral trade and increasing inter-penetration of their markets, objectives that have remained unfulfilled almost entirely because of lack of infrastructure linkage between Dhaka and Myanmar.

What we envision are multiple benefits from the project. It will open up trade-cum-tourist route to Myanmar and beyond, thereby helping Bangladesh's Look East policy acquire a practical dimension breaking out of the shell of mere ideas. An entirely new vista will open for Bangladesh with a multiplicity of direct contacts likely to be established across South East Asia by virtue of the road link to Myanmar.

Let's see the project implemented at the earliest convenience of the two governments, given the enormous benefit to accrue to both sides.

The nation at war with itself ?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

new government was in place in October 2001, the once dreaded Jamaat as the founder of Al-Badr also joined it with ministerial berths and a slot in the country's policy-making body. Even at that time, many saw it as an ominous development. Since then, in a fresh spate of terrorism across the country, the people started seeing their worst fears come true. At this stage -- and unless proved, it may be pure conjecture -- a nexus

way. Even when the newspapers were reporting the alacrity of the fundamentalists, their armed trainings in the wilderness of jungles and hills, the arms-hauls big and small, the reaction of the authorities was one of inaction or nonchalance. When there were reports of threat to the lives of political leaders, including the leader of the opposition, the responses of the establishment had been those of taunts, ridicule,

rankings of Awami League and its supporters. One wonders if the mission is then to decimate the country's only credible opposition and one that spearheaded the country's independence!

There is, however, unanimity on one point. Both the government and the opposition as well as civil society are of the view that the perpetrators of the crime are undoubtedly the enemies of the country, democracy, and the coun-

investigated at this stage.

While it was expected that the authorities would hunt down the criminals because they are the country's enemy, it now has arrayed its forces against protesters of the brutal incidence in Hobiganj. The authorities have so far been assuring the public of dispensing justice to the killing of Kibria and attempt on the life of Sheikh Hasina and so many other acts of terrorism. Till date, no

and on Sheikh Hasina. Inevitably public resentment is running high.

Instead of placating the public anxiety, the government is arranging its forces to beat back the protesters from the street. The establishment is visibly in a tantrum over its abysmal failures in either curbing the terrorism or in getting any clue to most of the killings in the bomb or grenade attacks so far. None of the criminals in these attacks could be nabbed with the entire state apparatus -- something people are not prepared to accept.

There are valid reasons that the Awami League, the prime victim of terrorism, is upset, with its confidence in the system shattered, and the civil society watching the situation is equally perturbed. So much so that the phenomenon did not escape the observation of the diplomatic community, particularly of the European Union, who repeatedly asked the government to restore the confidence of the opposition and civil society in its intent. They are also vocal against the police excesses in the street, witnessed during the last few days, when the police together with party cadres pounced on the protesters with rancour, vengeance, and hatred usually found among the rivals. Sadly, the government, the opposition, and the public, today present a spectacle of a triangular war among themselves, while the undetected and invisible criminals must be chucking from somewhere.

PERSPECTIVES

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between a series of strange events and a right-leaning government seemingly influenced by its fundamentalist elements is not difficult to find.

The rise of Bangla Bhai forces, their killing missions and mysterious escape from the clasp of the long hand of the law can be possible only with blessing from some quarter. Until the new wave of terrorism assumed its present way into the country's mainstream politics by being embraced by the BNP as one of its alliance partners -- a slur on the memory of the martyrs of 1971.

As the BNP's highly mandated vested interests never seemed to reconcile to our value system and wanted to reintroduce obscurantism and religious extremism as tools for social control and exploitation, throwing the country back to a medieval ethos. The fundamentalist forces who opposed tooth and nail our independence and the changes it brought have already wormed their way into the country's mainstream politics by being embraced by the BNP as one of its alliance partners -- a slur on the memory of the martyrs of 1971.

and contempt. The mood of the government could not but encourage and embolden the criminals.

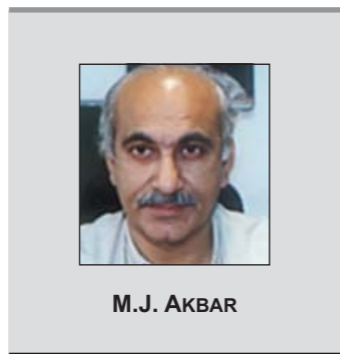
As a result, now these desperadoes wield power as much as those of the authorities, if not more, as evident from the latter's inability to have even any clue to who the criminals are after all -- let alone the question of apprehending or bringing them to justice. In the meantime, the mysterious killers have upgraded their arsenal and stratagem. Their choice of target is unmistakably precise and their targeted killings bear the stamp of marksmanship. And strangely all victims are from the

ty's value system. But the government's provocative utterances and its conduct do not match the action it should have taken to deal with the incidence of the magnitude of what occurred on August 21, 2004 and January 27, 2005 and for that matter what happened to the British High Commissioner at the Shrine of Shah Jalal (RA). The authority apparently couldn't care less, and with regard to investigation of the grenade or bomb attacks, its role has been opaque. A prolonged hide and seek with the cases has indeed rendered them difficult to be authoritatively

investigation even of the sensational terrorists is known to have been carried out -- let alone the question of apprehending any of the criminals of the grenade or bomb attacks and bringing them to justice. Obviously, by now the public does not trust the establishment any more and there is increasing demand for international investigation. Here, too, the government's role is not transparent and nobody knows the result of the involvement of international investigation teams including Interpol, Scotland Yard, or FBI, both in the attacks on British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury

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The silence of democracy



M. J. AKBAR

once slippage begins, it is rarely reversed; and defeat builds further momentum beyond the election. The BJP is trapped in that slide. It could not, in alliance with Shiv Sena, find that extra edge in Maharashtra; and it is either stagnant or in danger of further erosion in Haryana, Jharkhand, and Bihar. I am not saying this on the basis of exit polls after the first phase of elections in the three states.

Only the very rich now believe in

George Bush White House, which was so good at picking up the silence of the Bible Belt, missed out on the silence of the Quran Girdle.

How long have Shias been waiting silently for power in Iraq? From one perspective I can count up to more than 1,300 years by the Roman calendar and 1,400 by the Islamic one. Ever since Hazrat Ali's son Iman Hussain and his family and followers were martyred on the field of Kerbala in the struggle for

the two Holy Cities were occupied by non-Muslims. The British tried direct rule in Iraq. In the month of Ramadan, 1920, the Shias declared jihad against the British occupation in Najaf and Kerbala. They called the British "Fanj" -- a term once reserved for Crusaders. Memories run deep. Sunnis willingly joined the uprising. The British had to withdraw their administrator, A.T. Wilson: since Iraq was also known as Mesopotamia, Wilson was nicknamed

Army. The British ambassador Sir Michael Wright went into hiding, but within 24 hours struck a deal with the new strongmen assuring the protection of British interests. In February 1963, officers belonging to the Baath Party seized power from the squabbling coalition of interests. But irrespective of who was boss in Baghdad, every boss belonged to the Sunni minority. The last and most successful of these bosses was of course Saddam Hussein,

Saddam, came out sharply against Khomeini and for the Shah of Iran. But the Shia street was talking a different language. The slogan there was stark: "We are there for you to sacrifice, Khomeini!"

Saddam and Khomeini came to power in the same year: 1979. Khomeini gave a call to Iraq's Shias to rise against Saddam and he responded as only he could. No one knows how many were executed. Ayatollah Hakim was sentenced to death but later allowed to go to Iran. In April 1980 Sadr and his greatly-respected and loved sister Amina were executed by Saddam. Since these surnames have returned to the daily news, perhaps you can make your own connections.

Perhaps the Bush White House made two miscalculations. It transferred the Shia hate for Saddam into a welcome for America. And it mistook silence for consent. Washington's calculation was that its preferred Shia, Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, would get enough votes from his community to cobble an alliance with the pro-American Kurds that would enable him to remain at the head of government during the writing of a Constitution. (What Iraq has voted for is a Constituent Assembly and an interim government.) But the leader of the Shia silence was Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In the first hint of the future, the Ayatollah had over 70 percent of the vote against Allawi's 18 percent. Ayatollah al-Sistani has waited for this day. His message to his community was simple: keep quiet, leave the violence to Sunnis, and keep your powder dry for the elections. That is why he reined in Moqtada Sadr, when Sadr picked up the gun. The Shias could turn to the gun if they are denied power.

There is an old and familiar Chinese proverb that might be appropriate for Bush just now. Be careful about what you want, because you might get it. He wanted democracy in Iraq. He has got just the first taste of it.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

BYLINE

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exit polls. In other words, only those who have a lot of money to waste -- whether they are politicians or television czars -- spend hard cash on such polls. Media is far from infallible. Nor is this an Indian phenomenon. Exit polls put John Kerry into the White House, sending him into the stratosphere for a few hours. But if you get things wrong, decency demands a modicum of restraint along with a mea culpa.

It was amusing to see the precision with which pundits, who got every prediction wrong last year, forecast how Lalu Yadav was slipping and would fall. I have no idea whether Lalu Yadav is going to win or not. History suggests that he doesn't like losing. In any case, if we have lived with Lalu in power for 15 years, we can wait another three weeks for the Election Commission to let us know his fate in what has become a scatter-shot election.

The results of silence are more dramatic. It is surprising that the power against the Umayyads, Sunnis have been in power in the region that constitutes modern Iraq. Damascus was the capital then; Baghdad was built by the Abbasid Caliph Mansur. The Shias helped the Abbasids overthrow the Umayyads, and were speedily dispensed with once their fervour had been exploited. Abbasids, in turn, surrendered space and then power to Central Asian Turks before the Mongol Hulegu destroyed them and Baghdad in 1258. There were various successor states, divided between Turks and most famously the Kurdish family of Saladin until the Ottomans (mispronounced as Ottomans) restored central authority, stability, and unity till the British victory in the First World War in 1918. So far, so good, so Sunni.

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In 1917 the British seized Jerusalem and Baghdad from the Turks; by 1918 they had all the Arab lands in their control, including Mecca and Medina -- the first time in history that

"Despot of Messpot."

In 1921 Winston Churchill, colonial secretary of the Empire, installed a puppet government with an Arab face to appease sentiment. He imposed a Hashemite Prince, Faisal, as the new king of Iraq. Faisal had never set foot in his country till he was seated on its throne at six in the morning of August 23, 1921. The band played *God Save the King*.

Faisal was a Sunni.

The vicissitudes of colonial politics need not detain us, except to note that oil was controlled by western companies, and the British retained military bases long after they officially "withdrew" from sovereign Iraq.

Anger against the compromised family of Faisal finally turned savage, and on July 14, 1958 the ruling family was massacred (royal body parts were distributed by a delighted populace as trophies) after a coup led by the Free Officers of the Iraqi

who emerged at the top of yet another bloodstained heap in 1968. Of course Saddam was also a Sunni.

Shia political mobilisation in a modern context began after the coup of 1958, with the formation of the Al-Dawa Al-Islamiya by Mahdi al-Hakim and Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr. Its aims were to establish adult franchise and democracy (naturally, for Shias were 60 percent of the population), revive Islam, fight atheism (read Communists), and create an undefined Islamic Republic. In 1965 a fellow cleric and exile from Iran came to live in Najaf: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In a series of lectures between January 21 and February 8, 1970 at Najaf he defined that Islamic state and offered a diagnosis for the "hopelessness and impotence of the Muslim world." The pro-establishment Shia leadership in Najaf, led by Grand Ayatollah Abolqassem Khoi, supported by

OPINION

An open letter to the Prime Minister

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

ADAM Prime Minister: I am writing this letter with deep sense of sorrow, anguish, and frustration on hearing of the death of a distinguished citizen of this country along with a few other political activists in Sylhet. You must know that the country has been passing through a very critical period of 32 years of its existence. The country belongs to 130 million people. It does not belong to a very microscopic class of people. The exchequer of the government comes from the poor tax-payers of the country who voted you to power in the election of 2001 because of frustration and despair caused to the country by Awami League during their tenure from 1996 to 2001.

Let me remind you, that the election manifesto of BNP and election campaign by yourself mentioned very categorically that law and order in the country would receive topmost priority and that you pledged to bring law and order under control if BNP was voted to power. Since the election of 2001, three years have elapsed, but the law and order situation has continuously been deteriorating beyond comprehension, as has been demonstrated in the recent violence and killings in Sylhet itself, apart from in the northern part of the country where it apparently appears that the government does not function in response to the oppression and random killings by Bangla Bhai. It is really a mystery to witness such a situa-

tion when the government in power remains unconcerned.

It is indeed amazing to witness the total failure of the present administration to arrest the violence and killings and bring criminals to justice. The assassination attempt on the British High Commissioner on May 21, 2004 and followed by the assassination of Shah Abu Mohammad Shamsul Kibria, former Finance Minister and distinguished international bureaucrat, who served the United Nations as Executive Secretary of Escap (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) in Bangkok with distinction. Escap is the regional commission of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. SAMS Kibria was nominated by President Ziaur Rahman

on the recommendation of the Foreign Minister Mohammad Shamsul Haq for this coveted post at the United Nations. As Foreign Secretary under the BNP government of Ziaur Rahman SAMS Kibria undertook successful trips to South Asian countries to negotiate the concept of regional cooperation in South Asia floated by the President.

Strategically, Bangladesh has no importance in international politics, but its natural resources like gas and oil evoke interest in the industrialized countries for obvious reasons. The comparing of Bangladesh with that of Taliban style of government means that it would have serious repercussion in the not too distant future. The article in the New York Times of January 23, 2005 is the beginning of that pro-

cess. You might know that the attack on the World Trade Centers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC on September 11, 2001 resulted in a strategy of launching pre-emptive attacks, which has been carried out in Iraq without any evidence of weapon of mass destruction and provocation. This pre-emptive theory has been strengthened with another theory to "spread freedom and democracy" in different parts of the world.

Madam Prime Minister, you were elected by the people of Bangladesh to establish democratic norms and principles in the country. But it seems that the country is run autocratically. There is no voice of the opposition in the Parliament in spite of the undertaking to Jimmy Carter, former President of the US before the general

election. Both you and the leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina (and immediate past Prime Minister) gave this undertaking to work in a democratic manner. Actually you are treading on a difficult path in history. It looks like the breaking down of the country. I am neither concerned about the BNP nor about the existence of Awami League, but I am concerned about the existence of my beloved country -- which gave so much blood that no country has suffered like Bangladesh in living memory.

Madam Prime Minister, you have reached to a pinnacle of glory being twice the Prime Minister of the country. More or less the same is the case with Sheikh Hasina. You have nothing to lose or gain. Both of you should have c o n s i d e r e d

each other as fair political opponents who have in common the traumatic experience of the assassination of close members of the family. As of now, your politics and that of Sheikh Hasina did not bring any significant development in the country for which one can feel proud. During your tenure Bangladesh has been described as the number one corrupt country in the world. Unbridled corruption and total lawlessness have caused concern among the saner elements in the country. This being the situation in the country, there are two options remain open for resolving the existing problem in the greater interest of the country. Either you should consider resignation and handing over power to a caretaker administration or you shall have

to rule the country pragmatically in democratic manner in consultation with all political parties to bring the law and order situation under total control. It is not a difficult task if you have strong will and passion for the country. Party politics should not remain above the country.

Secondly, all student fronts should be banned without any hesitation. Students should concentrate on education only. There is no option for them. Thirdly, all wayward parties like Bangla Bhai should be brought under the law immediately without any hesitation. Fourthly, Bangladesh should negotiate with India to tackle this crisis jointly without further delay. Thank you, Madam Prime Minister.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former