

## Welcome move against extremists

*Govt shouldn't have belittled media reports*

FINALLY, after months of procrastination, the government in a welcome move has banned the two militant Islamic organisations JMB and JMB and arrested some of their leaders accusing them of a series of bomb attacks and murder with a view to creating anarchy. We are heartened by the State Minister for Home Babar's claim that the government acted 'out of its own sense of responsibility' and not due to any external pressure. The question we would like to raise now is how far is the government willing to go now that it has suddenly awakened to its 'own sense of responsibility'. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of this move and how serious it is for the future of Bangladesh. We cannot permit any group, whatever its public profile may be, to create anarchy through terrorism. We cannot allow any force to destabilise our democracy and our way of life.

Now that the government has finally made its move we suggest a very vital accompanying step. These militants are trying to present themselves as proponents of Islam and those who speak and act against them as acting against Islam. This propaganda must be effectively countered. They not only do not represent Islam in any real sense but in fact distort a religion of peace and progress as a militaristic theology given to wanton violence and intolerance. This is precisely the image of Islam that its enemies would like to project. These groups have hijacked a glorious religion and are using it as a cover to achieve their own political agenda. These people will have to be exposed for what they are, and not be allowed to exploit the religiosity of our people.

We would also like to suggest that the government would have been much better served if it took the hundreds of media reports on extremists' activities a little more seriously instead of accusing the media of lies and exaggeration. From the very beginning the government went into a denial mode wrongly concluding that any other course of action would affect our image of being a tolerant society. The truth is, it is because we are tolerant the extremists are so active. We expect the government to learn a fundamental lesson from this experience -- that it should have greater respect for the independent media and take what we report not as figment of our imagination.

A final word. Let not this be a one off step but the first of a genuine attempt to not only curb but in fact completely uproot extremism from our midst. We have already lost a lot of time.

## Identifying rich tax evaders

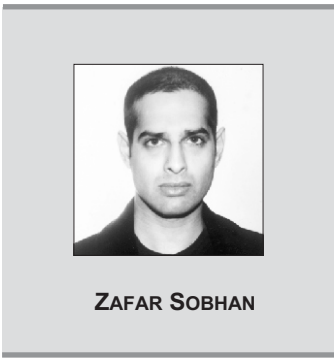
*Welcome, but examine revenue officials' role, too*

THE National Board of Revenue (NBR)'s initiation of a process to identify tax dodgers among rich businessmen and professionals couldn't have come a day later. It is no secret that a large number of taxable incomes remain out of the collection net. And, taxpayers in collusion with officials resort to corrupt practices in order to evade paying amounts due to the government.

While commending the NBR's decision to home in on the many dodging taxpayers, we cannot fail to see that the issue is more complicated than mere identification of the evaders. There is a general impression that unless a section of tax officials played a part in the unholy business of tax evasion, the latter wouldn't have happened, not at least on a scale being currently witnessed. It is alleged that tax officials cut deals with dishonest people in the high income bracket thereby nullifying the force of rules and regulations of the revenue department. Now, the nexus between the evaders and taxmen must not only be discovered, but also demolished for the sake of enhancing the efficiency of the tax administration and raising the collection levels.

The decision-makers should not also be oblivious of the allegations often brought by honest taxpayers that they face harassment while submitting returns and paying taxes. The procedural complications arising out of the tax officials seeking out this or that paper or statement can indeed be a disincentive for conscientious taxpayers. There is no doubt that the credibility of the tax department is at a low ebb and it needs raising for any marked improvement in the revenue collection figures.

# Tribal loyalties



SOMETIMES I wonder if I am being a little too alarmist when I think that Bangladesh is poised on the edge of a precipice.

But then I am reminded that in the year and a half since I returned to Dhaka that there has been a massive unsolved arms haul in Chittagong, that the British High Commissioner narrowly escaped assassination, that virtually the entire opposition leadership escaped death by seconds on August 21, and that senior opposition leaders Ivy Rahman, Ahsanullah Master, and Shah AMS Kibria, among others, have been killed by assassins.

So, no, on further reflection, I think that it is safe to say that there exists sufficient cause for alarm.

Indeed, I haven't even mentioned the vigilante operations of Bangla Bhai and the JMB in the North-West of the country or the killing of journalists or the murderous attack on Prof. Humayun Azad or the many other insecurities that we must live with on a daily basis.

The question for me then becomes how come so many of the people I see and interact with on a daily basis are not equally alarmed?

They live in the same country. They read the same newspapers. They watch the same news on

television. So why do so few people seem to think that we are facing a serious crisis?

It's an interesting question and I think that the answer lies in our collective national psyche and the pathologies that dwell therein.

One answer might be that they don't believe that anything will happen to them.

But there might be another reason as well. Call it cognitive dissonance. The inability to think or realise something that causes you discomfort or clashes with some of your most cherished

punish bad. Performance to a large extent is meaningless. We live in a system of patronage and so the logical thing is to stick by your tribe through thick and thin as that is the only means to ensure one's continued share of the spoils.

Of course this is not true for the many of those who are shut out of the patronage system and thus have no stake in who forms the government other than that of a citizen who wants the most effective and responsive government possible.

country?

This one is pretty simple really. It is not corruption. It is not poor governance. It is not higher prices. It is not our balance of payments. It is not unemployment or education or health. It is not our foreign policy or our relationship with India. It is not even law and order though these all remain huge issues.

Don't get me wrong. All of these things are of crucial importance. In a different time these would be exactly the issues on which I think that the people should base their allegiances.

## STRAIGHT TALK

**My sense is that too many people don't look at the situation through the prism of the threat to democracy any more than they look at politics through the prism of economic issues. Too many people look at the political and security situation through the prism of their tribal loyalties and see only what they want to see. I don't believe as a nation that we can afford such short-sightedness.**

beliefs.

Most people I come across are from the middle and upper-middle classes and live in the capital. They are, by and large, supportive of the government and so I have a strong suspicion that they simply tune out information that doesn't speak well of the government and that might cause them discomfort.

They have internalised the idea that to worry or to voice concern about such things is to speak ill of the country or at the very least to speak ill of the government.

Most of these people unfortunately have more or less tribal loyalties when it comes to politics, and nothing -- certainly not anything as inconvenient as the facts -- is going to cause them to rethink their belief system.

Thus they do not necessarily reward good government and

This is why both the BNP government of 1991-1996 and the AL government of 1996-2001 were unceremoniously removed from office by the voters at the first opportunity due to their poor records.

But the available statistics indicate that among the more moneyed and privileged classes -- the classes that enjoy the patronage of one party or the other -- there was and is relatively little shifting of allegiances.

But surely the time has finally come for us to move beyond our tribal allegiances and look squarely at the crisis that the country is in and to try to figure out how best to retrieve the situation.

Let's look at the political situation right now and ask the question: what is the pre-eminent problem we are facing right now in the

But today in Bangladesh the pre-eminent issue is the fact that someone or some group is systematically trying to subvert the democratic process by targeting the senior opposition leadership for assassination.

Basically, today we no longer enjoy the most fundamental of freedoms -- the freedom from fear. If you cannot even go to campaign in your constituency without fear for your security -- if you cannot hold a political rally for fear of death -- then where can you go and what kind of politics can you engage in?

Meaningful participatory democracy has been stopped in its tracks. We are now in danger of moving from democracy to a system where whoever has the greatest capacity for violence gets to call the shots. That's the real problem we are facing right now as a country.

The second issue is that apart from the bomb and grenade-throwing terrorists -- whose identity remains unclear -- there are other very easily identifiable elements in the country who are also acting undemocratically.

These include Islamists such as Bangla Bhai. These include those who have carried out attacks against the Ahmadiyya community. These include ruling party affiliated goons who have attacked the meetings and rallies of Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury and Dr.

Kamal Hossain.

We do not know if there is any connection between the unknown terrorists who have been causing so much fear and insecurity and the known anti-democratic elements who have been equally if less murderously active.

But there can be no question that the main problem this country faces today is the steady unraveling of the democratic consensus.

To my mind there is no greater threat to both our short and long-term stability and security than that the democratic process seems to be breaking down and that the respect for democracy that has sustained and enriched us for the past decade and a half seems to be in retreat.

To my mind this is the prism through which our choices should be viewed. Not the prism of the

economy. Not the prism of foreign policy. Certainly not the prism of our tribal loyalties.

We need to be looking at our choices through the prism of democracy.

This should be something everyone can agree on. We all want democracy. We all want democratic space. We all want the freedom from fear. We all want free and fair elections. No one wants to be ruled by the gun.

Establishing democracy in 1991 was the greatest achievement of our recent history. The movement brought out the best in the country and even demonstrated that the different political parties and groupings could cooperate when the stakes were sufficiently high.

For all the ills and discontents of the past decade and a half, democracy has served us well and is the only guarantee we have against tyranny and terror. Let us not be so quick to abandon our fragile democratic heritage.

But my sense is that too many people don't look at the situation through the prism of the threat to democracy any more than they look at politics through the prism of economic issues.

My sense is that too many people look at the political and security situation through the prism of their tribal loyalties and see only what they want to see.

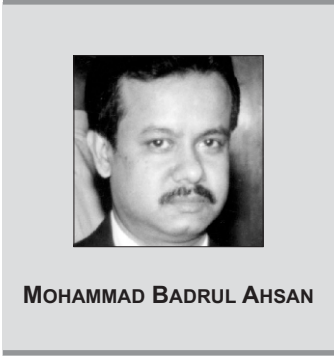
I don't believe as a nation that we can afford such short-sightedness.

I would suggest that it is time to look again. The question I have for every conscientious citizen of the country is: what exactly would it take to reconsider your tribal loyalty to one party or another.

The fate of the nation and the future of democracy lie in the answer.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

# The range of change



I don't remember who said it, but the only thing constant in life is change. There was a time when we hated to see a drop of slime in a bucketful of milk. It is now the other way around. We are happy to find a drop of milk in a bucketful of slime. Things have really changed.

Forget the posturing, and let us get to the point. We have changed the world, which has changed us as well. Until the 1970s, the Queen of England was not even permitted to be in the presence of a divorced person. Now she has changed. Her son, the heir to her throne and a widower, is marrying a divorced woman. The American negroes were slaves until they fought for their rights and got their freedom. Martin Luther ushered in the Reformation. Lenin brought the Revolution. This is how change comes, from mother's heart, lover's charm, warrior's spear, soldier's gun, reformer's will, and revolutionary's zeal.

But the question is how big is the piece of the string? How much change is granted? How much change is good? Change is the heaving breath of eternity as lives move, events occur and history shifts. The man who claimed that

the earth revolved around the sun was condemned as a heretic. Many who spoke of God and religion were burned at the stake. Prophets were persecuted, reformers ridiculed, heroes heckled, and rebels reviled; yet everything happened to bring about change.

There is, however, a sad side to it. Change proves that nothing lasts forever, what is dear to one generation is despised by another. What change reveals is the hypocrisy that is buried in the destiny of mankind, unfolding like a play in

is right today, what was sin is sunshine, what was ugly is beautiful, what was evil is good. Parents hope their children will drink but never get into drugs. People don't mind if politicians make money so long as they do some good work. The society is more worried about safe sex than fornication and adultery. Poverty is not an issue because it is perfectly all right to become filthy rich. Same-sex marriage is spreading like goodwill.

Challenge is the sapling of change. Believe in Hegel, believe

centuries brought the dizzying speed and whisked the world from local, to national to international stage and from agriculture to industry to technology to information age.

Change is good, change is godly as the old yields place to the new, yesterday, today and tomorrow, childhood, youth and old age, the sequence of time, which gives you the sense of motion within the parameters of fixed destiny.

Hence, nothing stays put as life moves on, the fleeting mood of

increasingly important. Work was separated from leisure, which led to development of spectator sports like cricket and football, and the rise of music hall entertainment for the new working class.

The close-knit rural communities disappeared and the middle class started to emerge since 1812. It was found in 1851 that the attendance of the eligible population at church service on Sunday was falling. It was every man for himself, which was the ethos of the Age, and Charles Darwin's

demented. There was a time when brothers could marry their sisters. There was a time when people owned the lives of other people, buying and selling them like cattle.

Time flowed, and changes followed. Many of those changes removed inhibitions, prejudices and superstitions to break the shackles of human minds. It brought freedom, it brought tolerance as human endeavours paved the way to higher civilizations. But higher civilizations brought higher decadence as the increased freedom sharpened itself to moral oblivion.

This is where it stands now, when keeper is usurper, ignorant is wise, guilty is innocent, loser is winner, milk is slime, the moral regimen of right and wrong locked together in inverted positions. So we are living in the age of contradictions, casting pearls before swine, decorating monkeys with medals of honour, our concealed heads bowing before contemptible men.

Lord Alfred Tennyson once exclaimed, "Forward, forward let us range/Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change." Such is the fate of men that he must charge ahead in the course of depleting himself. Looking back where he started, it is quite a change. The substance is gone, while the style remains. The man has vanished, while his vanity stands.

To talk about it, slime and milk look the same. That is the range of change, a long and arduous journey from inane to inane.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

# Koizumi to avoid Bangladesh during his South Asia tour

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

ALTHOUGH the government of Japan has not yet officially announced it, the press in Tokyo has disclosed on Tuesday (22 February) the details of the planned visit of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to four South Asian and European nations in early April. According to news reports, Koizumi is planning to visit India, Pakistan, Netherlands and Luxembourg to discuss various issues with the leaders of those countries. During the four-nation tour expected to start from end of April, the prime minister is likely to discuss bilateral as well as regional issues.

The period coincides with the yearly holiday session in Japan when most of the offices and institution remain close for a few consecutive days. Koizumi has decided to avail the opportunity to pursue Japan's bid for the permanent membership of the UN Security Council, which he sees as one of the principal achievements that he intends to leave as he is poised to give up the leadership post in Sep-

tember.

In India Koizumi's focus of attention would obviously be on UN reform, for which Japan is pressing hard with the aim of ensuring Tokyo's permanent membership at the Security Council along with Brazil, India and Germany. Some observers also see the visit to India as quite significant from economic side, as Japan foresees an emerging India with which forging a closer economic tie would benefit both. Pakistan most likely has received a compromising inclusion in the itinerary as South Asian watchers in Japan feel that there is a need to convince Islamabad not to rock the boat of permanent membership of the Security Council as four nations including India are now in a firm agreement to achieve the goal.

During his stopover in Islamabad, the Japanese prime minister is expected to urge for a peaceful settlement of the long-disputed Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan. He is also supposed to utter a few words of praise for President Pervez

Musharraf for his effort in containing terrorist threat in the region and would also offer Japanese assistance in various fields.

To many in Bangladesh, it might come as a surprise that Dhaka has been omitted from the list of places the Japanese prime minister is expected to make stop over during his short visit. Many among us tend to believe that among all south Asian countries, Bangladesh probably occupies a higher ranking in Japan's preference. I'm not sure where from such conclusion has been derived. It might be a mere expectation among the present ruling elites of our country that the negotiation that Bangladesh con-

ducted under the leadership of late Ziaur Rahman during a brief hijack drama of a Japan Airline jet almost thirty years ago had a permanent impact on Japan, and as a result, Dhaka deserves a preferential treatment in matters related to Japan and South Asia.

Moreover, in the past it had been a regular practice by the Japanese prime ministers to visit a number of countries of the region during one single trip. Toshiki Kaifu visited India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1988, and the next Japanese prime minister to visit the region was Yoshiro Mori, who in August 2000 made a four-nation trip to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.

As a result, it might sound quite rational to ask why the present Japanese prime minister has decided to avoid Bangladesh and Nepal.

Of course there is no official explanation to the matter as it is diplomatically not correct to explain why the leader of a certain country avoids visiting some places and prefers others. It is an exclusive decision of a sovereign government and hence no official briefing is expected on such matters. Yet, the question might haunt many of us who might take it as a heart-breaking news comparable to one conveyed to a deserted lover about the break up of a desired relationship.

More so because we tend to see Japan as a very close friend with whom we have good rapport almost in every matter.

Saying so, we should not forget that Bangladesh has not been alone to be side stepped in the itinerary of the forthcoming South Asia tour of the Japanese prime minister. The other country being Nepal, we might ask us the question what has been common in the eyes of Japanese about Bangladesh and Nepal to be in the same group of nations. In recent days the foreign ministry of Japan had issued two separate statements expressing concern about things happening in Bangladesh and in Nepal. The first

statement issued towards the end of January was concerning the brutal killing of our former finance minister and a former UN Under Secretary General, Shah AMS Kibria. Japan urged the government to bring the killers to justice and expressed hope that such atrocities would not be repeated.

The second statement issued on February 2 dealt with the situation in Nepal, in which Japan hoped that Nepal's political crisis would be solved as soon as possible and expressed concern over detention of political leaders. Japanese foreign ministry also urged the government of Nepal that the freedom guaranteed by the constitution is restored without any delay.

For Nepal the recent political development comes as an obvious reason for the Japanese prime minister not to visit that country. As for Bangladesh, despite the official statement concerning the situation of the country, a second stumbling block seems to be more in line with the Japanese decision.

In international relations, visits by heads of states or governments are seen as reciprocal practices.

Countries that enjoy positions of privilege are more inclined to take into account the reciprocity as an essential precondition for exchanging visits. Our former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited Japan in early 1998, less than two years after she formed her government. Yoshiro Mori's visit to Bangladesh in August 2000 has generally been seen in Japan as a reciprocal one.

One of the striking failures of the present government is no doubt its inability to arrange a visit of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to Japan since she took office in October 2001, despite the self-declared claim by some within the ruling elites that Japan prefers the present government more than the previous one. As a result, for the Japanese prime minister no room was left even for a consideration of the inclusion of Bangladesh in his itinerary. It looks like we already have missed the boat, as we will be forced to contain ourselves by watching Junichiro Koizumi passing by so close from our door.