

## Assault on landless people

### Attackers must not go unpunished

ARMED land grabbers set on fire 364 homes in three villages under two police stations in Satkhira district on Sunday morning. They attacked the landless people living in Khas land, leased out to them by the government, and left at least 80 of them injured. Lethal weapons like guns and bombs were used in the unprecedented assault on the poor victims.

Clearly, it was a brutal attempt to evict the landless from their homes, though their lease rights are established and they are the lawful occupants of the land. In terms of atrocity and barbarity, it has surpassed all known incidents of this nature. It is a reflection of how vulnerable some disadvantaged segments of society are to the machinations of vested interests. It is also an example of how bad the law and order situation is in the remote areas. The point is relevant because all our thoughts on and assessments of law and order are generally focused on the capital city.

Police are reported to have arrested eight people in this connection. Of course the culprits need to be brought to justice. But it is a regrettable lapse on the part of the law enforcers that they allegedly arrived at the scene of occurrence at least two hours after the rampaging was over. The attackers got enough time to destroy the homes and assault the people. The police have again failed to respond quickly.

Now, the victims have ended up paupers. The law enforcers should guarantee their security and the local administration should see to it that they are fully reinstated in their homes.

The assault has created a humanitarian crisis in the area as a large number of people have lost their homes. The law enforcers must also find out who organised this armed attack which had all the elements of a raid conducted by a medieval chieftain to concur new areas. The vested interest groups cannot be allowed to subject poor people to this type of repression.

## Agriculture subsidy question

### The foot-dragging could cost us dear

CONTINUING indecision over grant of subsidy on diesel for irrigation-based farming may have queered the pitch for a good IRRI harvest. With an increase in the price of diesel by Tk 3 a litre, causing a justified concern amongst various circles over its possible adverse impact on irrigation-based farming, the government 'agreed in principle' to provide subsidy on diesel for purely agricultural purposes.

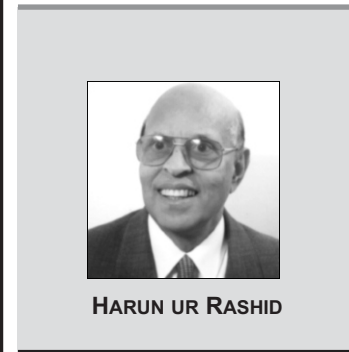
Against this backdrop, the agriculture ministry in a missive to the Finance Division on January 1 requested that Tk 381 crore subsidy be granted to the farmers so as to enable them to tide over the fuel crises. Two months on, the finance division, which had promised action after Eid-ul-Azha, remains unresponsive to the entreaties of the agriculture ministry.

All these came to light in a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on agriculture ministry on Sunday. Taking stock of the situation, it has rapped on the knuckle of the finance ministry for the inaction.

The implications can be quite serious. The entire IRRI season, cultivation and harvesting put together, ranges from February 1 to May 15. The cultivation season has effectively ended, so that we shall reap what we sowed. It could mean a diminished IRRI harvest. When the floods had led to poor Aman harvest, IRRI assumed critical importance in the food security scheme of things. Actually, a whole lot of odds were stacked against us when the import prices of cereals soared on the back of severe output shortfalls in major rice exporting countries. Lower domestic production of rice coupled with import uncertainties and high procurement prices made it imperative for us to galvanise all our resources for the sake of ensuring a good IRRI harvest. This has unfortunately not happened.

The fertiliser subsidies offered by the government were off the mark in terms of timelessness. It seems the diesel subsidy which has not even been offered has had no target to miss. It has drawn a bigger blank than missing a target. How tragic! Our agriculture policy, when tested on a contingency criterion, can prove extra brittle.

# The rise of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh



IN the backdrop of rising deep concern among development partners, on February 23 the government finally took action in banning two Islamic extremist organizations in the country, namely, *Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh* (JMJB) and *Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB), accusing them of a large number of bomb attacks and killings in recent times to create chaos in the country.

It is reported that eleven Islamic thinkers and leaders of the Jatiya Shariah Council on February 23 in a joint statement expressed the view that, "Those who are involved in terrorist activities in the name of Islamic organizations, are the enemies of the country and the nation. They should be brought to justice for punishment according to Islamic law (italics mine)."

A query may be put why the Islamic thinkers were so late in expressing their views when people have been suffering from the pernicious activities of the Islamic extremists for about two years. Again it is not understood why reference has been made to punishment under "Islamic law."

In the country there is an established criminal law which the judiciary uses for trial of criminal cases. Islamic law is applicable to personal matters, such as inheritance, marriage, divorce, custodianship, of children, guardianship, etc. There is no Islamic criminal law, to my knowledge, that exists in the country because Bangladesh is a multi-religious country and criminal law applies to all, irrespective of a person's faith.

While the government has decided to crack down on the Islamic extremists, in Washington, the development partners held five sessions in a two-day meeting on February 23-24, and issued a statement not favourable to Bangladesh's prevailing situation.

The view of the development partners on Bangladesh has been based partly on facts, and empirical analysis and partly on perceptions. The foreign missions located in the

country are the "eyes and ears" of the development partners and no doubt provide regularly the state of conditions and developments in Bangladesh to their headquarters.

The very fact that the development partners did not invite any one from the Bangladesh government to the sessions demonstrates that they wished to discuss the matter candidly among themselves, although they invited Bangladesh's alternate director of the World Bank to brief him on the outcome of the meet. It is reported that under the orders of the government the alternate director would not attend the briefing meeting.

It is more than two years, activities of Islamic extremists have become bolder and bolder and many of them have been caught, interrogated and arrested for violent activities in different parts of the country. Headlines in the national newspapers attest to their nefarious activities which many call asymmetric warfare. They hit the weakest points of society to show their cowardly violent attacks.

It is not understood how could the Islamic extremism rise in the country when the Islamic parties made a

poor show in the last three general elections. It has been noted that in successive elections since 1991, their share of popular vote has declined continuously. Let us briefly look at the statistics. A well-organized party, *Jamaat* secured 12.13 per cent in the 1991 election, 8.61 per cent in 1996, and in 2001 only 4.31 per cent. The *Islamic Oikya Jote* got 0.68 per cent of the vote. Given the veracity of the figures, the strength of Islamic

century, new interpreters of Islam came who taught that acquisition of knowledge by Muslims in madrasas meant only the study of theology. The study of science and technology was discouraged. The early successes of Ottomans did not stimulate intellectual renaissance. They became more occupied with rituals. The Industrial revolution missed the Islamic world. Some say that there has been no Martin Luther in Islam.

desperation among impoverished young people.

Young unemployed people are easier target by the extremist organizations to lure them with the propaganda that religion is the panacea of all social ills. It is believed that the orthodox votaries of Islam hold that their version of Islamic way of life is ordained by God and it will continue to remain so without any change until the end of

time. Any deviation from the way of life will constitute a mortal sin, a sure entry to hell.

Islam is for all times. The moral and spiritual teachings of Islam have eternal value and validity. Islam is not wrong, but literal or orthodox interpretations are wrong. Social and cultural practices are the result of a particular place. An Islamic scholar expressed the view that the more obscure and incomprehensible an assertion is on religious matters the more is the intensity of devoted acceptance displayed by the ignorant followers of the faith.

On interpretation of Islam, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, while hosting at the 2003 Islamic Summit in Kuala Lumpur, said: "Over the last 1400 years the interpreters of Islam, the learned ones, the ulamas, have interpreted and reinterpreted the single Islamic religion so differently that now we have a thousand religions which are often so much at odds with one another that we often fight and kill each other."

David Landes in his book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998) looked into the question

why some nations are poorer than others, came to the conclusion that Protestant-nations are generally richer than the Catholic nations because of their inherent conservatism of Catholic populations, and than Islamic societies, which were once inventive before orthodoxy in Islam discouraged invention, individual curiosity, and primacy of reason. Whether one agrees or not with Landes, the fact remains that the Islamic world remains a silent spectator to the industrialization and scientific advances of the West.

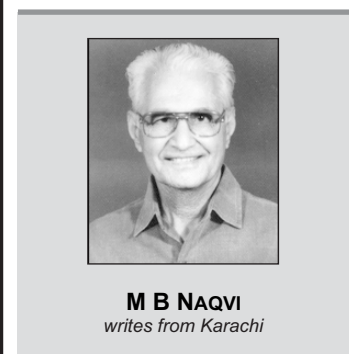
To support the above position, Dr. Mahathir said: "Whether we like it or not we have to change, not by changing our religion, but by applying its teachings in the context of a world that is radically different from that of the first century of the Hijrah. We talk so much about following the sunnah of the Prophet. We quote instances and the traditions profusely. But we actually ignore all of them."

For the last ten years Bangladesh has been marching forward in socio-economic development. The 2004 UN Human Development Index shows that the country has outranked Pakistan in socio-economic indicators. Poverty has fallen to 9.2 per cent between 1991 and 2000, according to the UNDP Bangladesh Progress Report released last February.

At this point in time of development activities, where it is estimated that \$900 million of foreign assistance was committed by donors for the current fiscal year, Bangladesh cannot afford to distance itself from the assistance and cooperation of development partners.

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# Will America always be unassailable?



THEY say what goes up comes down. Historically it is true. But then the US case is said to be so unique. It is the richest and most powerful country with an enviable resource base. It has most other attributes of a great power. No obvious rival is in sight.

Or perhaps that statement may not be strictly true. There may be no military rival of America. But there can be political rivals. There are in fact a few. EU and China are already power centres in their own right and are radiating their influence. Then, there is a suggestion from Mr. Natwar Singh, the Indian Foreign Minister: a coalition of China, India, and Russia will revolutionise Asia. One does not intend to discuss the merits or realism of this idea or to what degree this grouping can be a force to reckon with. But possibilities are there and anyone who dismisses it out of hand may be making a mistake.

There is no point in talking in terms of hypothetical possibilities only. It is much better to get hold of the factors that are shaping the

situation. That is a more promising way of weighing possibilities. One is focusing on the factors that are shaping Asia today and is not venturing to go beyond or out of them. The biggest factor shaping Asia is the US desire to dominate most parts of the world including much of Asia and to control the sources and nodal points in the transportation of sensitive raw material. In this venture the US is bound to tread on

many corns. Now in purely economic terms, America can be challenged and others can counter the American schemes to an extent. Needless to say, China, Russia, EU, Japan, and to an extent, India can make a dent in the American scheme. The issues and where-withal of challenges are strewn all over the continent. What that means is likely combinations and coalitions, if not alliances, that may arise to prevent the US from taking what it wants or doing as it wants. But there is a wholly different genre of opposition that should be taken note of.

It is the public opinion of common people. While great powers have contempt for public opinion at home and abroad, their desperate mea-

sures to mislead it bespeak a deeper realisation that world opinion is a powerful factor. Two recent issues have elicited a popular response that was overwhelmingly anti-American on the two issues of the day: the first was globalisation programme that, over the last decade, has evoked an astonishing measure of popular demonstrations against known protagonists of globalisation. The working classes

in America and in Europe are up in arms and are in the forefront of this major new ideological struggle.

This cannot be confused with the cold war categories. Today's amorphous mass of demonstrators does not belong to any particular state or champions a particular political philosophy. They are demonstrating against the consequences of globalisation in mainly the developed countries. No doubt, aware people of the third world have also taken it up. In order to rival the economic forum of Davos they have formed the World Social Forum to underline the issue of social justice. To repeat, it is a wholly different kind of protest against major powers with influence abroad but the latter

cannot twist or deflect it. The reason for this is that in these protests actual common people are involved.

The other factor that is shaping the world today, not simply Asians alone, is the anti-terror war that President George W Bush inaugurated after 9/11. Many people see it as simply white man's prejudice against Muslims mainly Asiatic. It is also meshes nicely with the old perennial racialism. In the context, it

is white man's prejudice against Muslims in particular and others in general. A siege mentality is developing among the white supremacists largely because their governments and media are fanning it to keep their attention diverted to non-substantive issues and away from local economic and social justice issues. But it remains only a facet of general racial approach that has been around for centuries.

The second major issue that has concentrated the minds of common people everywhere is Iraq. The kind of popular demonstrations that rocked London, Rome, Paris, and other European cities was unique in its intensity and it was clearly directed at American unilateralism

and high handedness. The depth of this feeling is remarkable. This is an emergent factor and it is not going to disappear soon or completely.

Even more important is the growth of opposition within the US against what can be called a modern version of Britain's Forward Foreign Policy in India's northwest. That this protest combines easily with anti-war and anti-American demonstrations in rest of European

the backyard of the US where other major powers dared not interfere. They may still not be able to interfere. But American overlordship is being openly challenged by common folks of Latin American countries.

Finally there is the question of the world economy. Can it continue to grow steadily, with globalisation producing no serious glitches. Who knows? But the possibilities inherent in the dollar crisis are mind boggling. They can cause a worldwide depression with even higher unemployment rates in developed countries and far more poverty in poor countries. If that happens all bets would be off. New factors may then arise. All one can say on the subject is that everyone should be wary and watchful. But evil possibilities are there. All these issue from high American interest rates and its effort to keep dollar-denominated assets stay in dollars.

Can this be called a new world shaping up? It is a constant theme of many international observers. The international order actually changes with every major event. But some of the issues now facing us are altogether of different magnitude, perhaps what may emerge will be more arresting -- and interesting. But the issue of the US remaining Number One remains open. A negative possibility inherent in the situation is also a factor in the situation.

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# In conversation with an Indian diplomat

SAFI KHAN

I was meaning to write this earlier but kept procrastinating till the recent spate of writings on India-Bangladesh relations motivated me to describe excerpts of a conversation (those nearby said it was actually a heated argument) I had with an Indian diplomat. While this piece may come across as yet another India bashing diatribe, my actual intent is to provide some indication as to why India's neighbours react the way they do.

After exchanging the customary greetings, I enquired as to whether there was a significant increase in the number of Indian visa applicants considering the long queues and if any steps were being taken to tackle this "problem." The diplomat

Ultimately, what India needs to realize is that as long as she is surrounded by less developed neighbours, they will continue to be a drain on her resources. That is the way human society works. Only a strategy that moves away from the usual bullying tactics and encourages these countries to prosper will benefit India in the long run.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was said to have proposed visa free travel but Pakistan's President Ziaul Huq didn't agree.

The conversation then shifted to demarcation of our countries borders. The diplomat informed me that the main point of contention was a mere 6.5 kilometer stretch and they had placed a proposal for settling it two years ago. What he failed to mention and a fact I later learned, was that Sheikh Mujib and Indira Gandhi signed a comprehensive land border agreement in 1974 that

Bangladesh ratified immediately but India is yet to do. Thus, a significant number of enclaves and the 6.5 kilometer stretch remain unresolved. Instead of forwarding alternate proposals, why doesn't India ratify the Mujib-Indira agreement? He also mentioned placing barbed wires to control the border similar to the Line of Control in Kashmir. I pointed to the USA's lack of success with its barbed wire border with Mexico and expressed misgivings about such a strategy working given India's resource constraints

On the issue of trade, the diplomat said that Bangladesh had little to offer India in terms of exports and that we were dragging our feet on a proposed free trade agreement. He pointed to the success of India's FTAs with Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan. In response, I mentioned that when we do have an export product (e.g. batteries), India slapped anti-dumping on them. India was ultimately forced to withdraw because she did not anticipate Bangladesh having the resilience to counter this at the WTO. He said

India's withdrawal was a political decision and I argued that the anti-dumping case was clearly illegal and India withdrew to avoid embarrassment.

I then expressed the view that if Tata was able to go through with their proposed investment, that alone would do more for our two countries relations than all the futile efforts by diplomats and politicians. I also hoped that our government would not botch the negotiations because Tata is a company based on strong values and commitment to

developing the regions where it invests. There is little ground for Bangladesh to view them with suspicion and all efforts need to be made to ensure that their strategy is not waylaid because of incompetence, corruption or prejudice on our side. The diplomat said that part of Tata's original proposal had been rejected and one will have to see how this plays out. We concluded our debate by hoping that the proposed Tata investment succeeds.

By the diplomat's own admission, Bangladesh is India's 5th largest market. Yet, the way Indian behaves with us at times makes me wonder whether their politicians and business community even know this fact. We too are thoroughly inept at leveraging this to our advantage. Reading some of our diplomats'

writings, the attitude reflected in this piece seems to be a hallmark of India's dealings with us. In fact, I mentioned to the diplomat that India's attitude is a primary factor for all her neighbours disliking her, at which he stated that foreign policy cannot be dictated based on other countries likes and dislikes. Ultimately, what India needs to realize is that as long as she is surrounded by less developed neighbours, they will continue to be a drain on her resources. That is the way human society works. Only a strategy that moves away from the usual bullying tactics and encourages these countries to prosper will benefit India in the long run.

Safi Khan works in development.