

Terror strikes all over the country

Nation must respond as one

THE chilling scope of the bomb attacks that swept the length and breadth of the country yesterday should leave no one in doubt as to the intent, organisation, and capability of the terrorists that were behind it. At last count, over 300 different bombing incidents had been recorded in 63 of the 64 districts of the country within a span of 30 minutes. Thankfully, there has been only one death reported so far.

The organisation and synchronicity of the blasts, together with the frightening fact that the authorities apparently had not the slightest inkling of what was coming, is a clear message as to the strength of the Jamat-ul-Mujahideen, who claim responsibility, and the nation's lack of readiness to deal with the threat that they pose.

First thing first. These attacks should shatter once and for all the government's dishonest posturing that there is no problem with religious extremism in the country. Please, no more mendacious denials that insult the intelligence of the public, and no more hurling false and irresponsible accusations at the media for its reporting on the rise of extremism. Too much time has been wasted peddling these falsehoods while the extremist elements have grown stronger and more brazen. We cannot afford to waste another moment.

The second point is that the bombings represent an intelligence failure of massive proportions. That a synchronised attack of this scale -- quite possibly the most widespread one-day peace-time bombing campaign in recent history -- could have been planned and executed with such stealth and precision points to the utter uselessness of our intelligence apparatus.

That our intelligence agencies should have been found to be so wanting when they should have been on high alert after the terrorist incidents of the past few years is even more shocking. The government must acknowledge this as a colossal failure.

The fact that the bombs were relatively small is little consolation. The intent of the bombers was clearly to send a message as to their reach and potency -- which has been received loud and clear. Had the intent been to spread death and destruction there is no doubt that thousands could have been killed or maimed and that the authorities would have been powerless to stop it. This is a truly scary thought.

Doubtless we will all have more to say once more facts start to filter in and the implications of this devastating event for the nation become more apparent. But today we would like to end by pleading with both the government and the opposition to not politicise this matter. This is not a time for the blame game or to irresponsibly point fingers and hurl accusations.

The bombers are fighting to violently overthrow our entire democratic system of government, which they termed as evil and against Islam. In the accompanying leaflet, the terrorists have clearly stated that they reject the Constitution and all the laws formed under it. The fact that in each district administrative offices and courts were bombed makes it abundantly clear that their target is the very foundation of the state.

Each one of us in the country -- government, opposition, or neutral -- must today unite behind our common purpose to root out the terrorists and defend our democracy from this unprecedented assault.

Israeli pullout from Gaza

A lot remains to be done

ISRAEL'S decision to withdraw unilaterally from Gaza is indeed a marked departure from its policy of holding on to the Arab land grabbed in 1967. If the withdrawal actually takes place as an indicator of Tel Aviv's sincere realisation that peace and illegal occupation of foreign land could not go together then we have moved some distance forward.

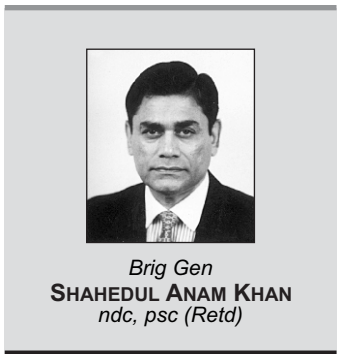
The move, though not part of any Middle East peace plan as such, is expected to initiate a process of reconciliation between the Palestinians and the Israelis. But peace in the region will have a real chance if Israel vacates all other lands which it had captured by force 38 years ago, and which remain the bone of contention in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Palestinians have suffered for too long under Israel's military domination supported by the United States. And Tel Aviv did too little in the past to convince them that it had any interest in peace making. But now they seem to have taken a positive-sounding initiative which needs to be reciprocated by the Palestinian leadership including the radical elements.

The stalled Middle East peace talks will have to be resumed immediately with a view to removing the whole lot of irritants that have put Israel and Palestine in a state of war for decades. Basically, violence has to come to an end with all Israeli-occupied territories returned to Palestine culminating in the establishment of a separate homeland for the people of Palestine.

Tel Aviv has embarked on the right path but will have to go a long way before settling its disputes with the Arab neighbours.

'Rethinking Islam'



It was not possible not to be drawn to a CNN discussion programme last week entitled "Rethinking Islam" where several Islamic scholars were invited to offer their insights in view of what the presenters described as the dwindling image of Islam. What were of particular interest, and that, which caught one's attention and agitated the mind no less, were the random and offhand remarks of the anchors that amounted to passing value judgments on the religion.

As the subject of the discussion, "Rethinking Islam" illustrates, the point at issue was that it was 9/11 and of late the London bombings, due to which the image of Islam had taken a plunge. The 'image' of Islam is not good, and that it has gone down even more after 7/7 was how one of the anchorpersons described the current 'state' of Islam. There were talks about the 'real Islam' and 'radical Islam' and of Islam having 'different faces'. And that the

Islam practiced in the US was different from the Islam in Saudi Arabia. And given the various ways that Islam has been interpreted whether or not there were various categories of Islam, and whether there is a need of 'rethinking' Islam.

The tenor of the discussion clearly hinged on the argument that it was Islam that should be held accountable for all the terrorist acts we see today. The causal connection was made

clear although it was 'radical' Islam that was blamed for the violent acts. Nonetheless, Islam is being put in the dock, not only by the CNN, the vast majority of western public opinion more so the press, has pilloried Islam, for the recent acts of some of its adherents.

But why must a creed be held accountable and denigrated for acts of commission of some of its followers, acts that are repugnant not only to the basic ethos of that religion but which patently contradict the fundamental teachings of its scripture also? Very few in the west seem to notice the fact that those who wage their war on the west, and it is war that bin-Laden

and his groups think they are involved in, imbued with the spirit of a so called 'Jihad,' have a totally convoluted interpretation of the word where its spiritual and moral vive are totally ignored and replaced by a very narrow and literal explanation of 'Jihad'. To suggest that it is holy is a distortion of the word 'because no war can be holy, least of all those that kill and maim innocent civilians and non-combatants.'

Khaled Abou El Fadl, a Fellow in Islamic Law at UCLA, very nicely explains the wrong association of 'Jihad' to terrorist acts in the following exposition. He says, "Islamic tradition does not have a notion of holy war. "Jihad" simply means to strive hard or struggle in pursuit of a just cause, and according to the Prophet of Islam, the highest form of jihad is the struggle waged to cleanse oneself from the vices of the heart. In Islamic theology, war is never holy; it is either justified or not. The Qur'anic text does not consider the simple fact of the belligerent's Muslim identity to be sufficient to establish the justness of his cause." In other

words, being a Muslim does not justify a war he may embark upon.

Thus, it will be a cardinal mistake to suggest, as some Western commentators do, that the West has made a strategic mistake in seeking to distinguish al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden from the rest of Islam, by arguing they are extremists, and therefore cannot be authentic Muslims. They assert that Bin Laden and his people come from

an Islamic tradition where jihad is a cardinal principle in the fight against unbelievers and that they have had tremendous backing from Muslims worldwide. To say that bin Laden has backing of the Muslims worldwide is far from the truth, but that he has been able to exploit the grievances of the Muslim can't be denied. But what the West conveniently forgets is that it is this 'jihadi' spirit that the US exploited in bringing the al Qaeda to bear on the Soviets in Afghanistan.

While one cannot condone the vile acts, the commissions of a man or a group cannot be attributed to a creed or a religion; neither should the

religion be held responsible for the deeds or misdeeds of a miniscule minority of its followers.

But, is it really the fault of the West for holding the view they hold about Islam and the Muslims? Is it really their ignorance of Islam that has contributed to the West's misperception about us, or there is really a variegated and truncated picture of Islam that our action and inaction have

projected which have spawned this feeling about Islam in the West?

No doubt there is an internal struggle within Islam itself where the intolerance and exclusivity demonstrated by the extreme puritans have made Islam appear to be on a collision course with the West. There is, as one scholar puts it, a religious struggle for the soul between Puritanism and modern Islam. Also, through a very selective reading and exclusive interpretation of the Quran, genuine grievances of the Muslims are exploited and sacred texts are misinterpreted to justify violence and terror. They mirror in image President

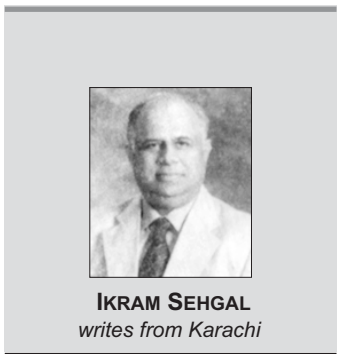
Bush's attitude of, "you are either with us or against us," therefore a fair target of state and non-state terrorism.

What is also overlooked is the fact that because of the struggle within Islam, the radicals, fed by extreme thoughts, have made their own societies as much as others' a target of their violent acts. One has only to look at Afghanistan, Turkey, Algeria and Iraq to see that the Muslims as much as non-Muslims have been the targets of these terrorists. Unfortunately, these minority Muslim extremists hog the western media.

Misperception of Islam by the west is largely due to misrepresentation and misinterpretation of its teachings and its sacred texts. Not only must the Islamic world seek deeper interaction and understanding with the other faiths, there is need for the same within Islam itself. That can be possible only if we go back to the Quran and interpret and understand the substance as well as the true meaning of it. And as El Fadl says, the burden and blessing of sustaining that moral trajectory -- of accentuating the Qur'anic message of tolerance and openness to others -- falls squarely on the shoulders of contemporary Muslim interpreters of the tradition

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An exercise in democracy



COMMUNITIES all over Pakistan start to renew their exercise of right of self-rule today, Aug 18, 2005. While the present Local Bodies system has a number of flaws, the very fact that it exists gives hope for the future, that the citizens will be able to use their vote to seat their favoured candidate in office for local governance is a matter of satisfaction. This is despite the fact that "pre-polls rigging" has taken place to such an extent that it will be a miracle to see those opposed to the present government get voted into any office. Looking for silver linings, since there are those who support the respective Provincial governments, at least a percentage of voters will see their rights exercised. There is a Hobson's choice between having this "part" exercise in democracy and having no democracy at all. Something is better than nothing, we must keep struggling, someday we can better our situation than what we have presently.

Political parties are a must for any democracy, they are the

melting pot where race, religion, sect, etc come together and form a strong bulwark against hate and prejudice on narrow parochial bigoted reasons. An experiment of non-party democracy was tried by having party-less Parliamentary elections during late Gen Ziaul Haq's regime, it fractured society along racial and sectarian fault lines and brought Pakistan to

then look at the farce, "groups" are nothing but another name for the political parties under another garb. Everyone and his uncle knows this subterfuge, if the Chief Election Commissioner doesn't, than respectfully he is living on another planet. Maybe he has pragmatically decided to let this camouflage remain for the good of the nation! Party-less elections are

grief with respect to peace and tranquility. People of different races and religions of like-minded belief can only come together to contest for electoral seats under the aegis of political parties. Party-less Local Bodies election forcing people to oppose each other on the basis of race, religion and sect, etc. could have been avoided, Gen Pervez Musharraf did not repeat late Zia's mistake during the Oct 2002 Parliamentary elections. Why we are now conducting Local Bodies as a party-less exercise in democracy is beyond me! People must mix with each other cutting across their relationships of race and/or religion for their own perception of one society, unifying together than as one nation, instead of creating ghettos, poor or rich at the level of the community. And

simply a mechanism to keep PPP and PML (N) out of power, one can only ignore the fact that both are national parties at the cost of national unity?

We have learnt no lessons from the 1977 General Elections. Despite the grouping of all the opposition parties under the flag of the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's PPP would have easily won if not gaining a two-thirds majority. There is no evidence of wide-scale electoral rigging being ordered by the late Prime Minister though he certainly did want a two-thirds majority in Parliament. There is evidence however that he did want to win "unopposed" in his traditional seat of Larkana and for that the Federal and Provincial machinery went overboard to arrange. If it had stopped at that, Bhutto

(and the PPP) would have got away with it. When some of the more "loyal-than-the-king" Chief Ministers, Federal Ministers, Provincial Ministers, etc decided that they also wanted to show their "unopposed" popularity a la Bhutto, it got out of hand. Those who did not "manage" this "result" then used the administrative machinery to rig the elections wherever it could

be done. The lop-sided win for the PPP, evoked a backlash with the launch of a country-wide protest by the PNA, the people coming out en masse in the streets. PPP's success turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory, the clock on (not of) democracy had stated ticking, July 5, 1977 was bound to happen. Today 28 years later, "pre-polls rigging" is still the name of the game. Rigging may not happen everywhere, but then some do want to see themselves and their favourites in place, irrespective of the popular vote. An immediate protest may not happen, somewhere along a mass reaction may well set in. Someone has sent up a trial balloon for having the President elected by an Electoral College of Local Bodies Nazims/Naib Nazims. Musharraf is popular among the

"great silent majority", instead of cashing in on his wide base of support, why depend upon such an indirect method with no democratic credibility?

In some cities like Karachi (at least 3 districts out of 5), Hyderabad, Sukkur, Nawabshah and Mirpurkhas, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) will have lop-sided victories because of their concentrated

mass voter strength some intelligent seat adjustment will give them additional seats in non-traditional areas. MQM will not only have control of these five cities, for the first time they will have as large a bloc of seats, if not larger, than PPP in Sindh. While this MQM urban - PPP rural divide is not really conducive, the parties will have to enter into a coalition in the later Parliamentary elections, the best form of "check and balance" in a democracy. In the interim, control of the major city of Karachi will bring with it the responsibility of governance. The previous Nazim Jamaat-I-Islami's Niamatullah is basing his campaign on the strength of his incorruptibility and performance, being supported by other opposition parties. Given

the circumstances of MQM electoral strength, this challenge will not succeed. A lot of people had predicted bloodshed leading upto the elections, while this was not in the cards, a breakdown of law and order could take place in the future. The maturity with which MQM dons the onus of governance will be the acid test of how responsibly it administers Pakistan's largest metropolitan city, if it resorts to heavy-handedness then we Karachi-ites may return to another cycle of bloodshed.

Democracy provides accountability, accountability is another name for justice, regrettably a totalitarian regimes are not accountable to everyone, they usually put themselves beyond the pale of judicial cynosure. What is required is not selective but unadulterated accountability that not only provides equal justice for all but holds all citizens of the state equally answerable to the rule of law. Democracy is of no use to the individual unless the various freedoms are available at his (or her) doorstep and he (or she) has a say without any hindrance in the governance of his (or her) immediate community. Local Bodies provides the "grass roots" democracy that is extremely important for the welfare and well-being of a unified society.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

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.

Jahangirnagar University

When I first went to Jahangirnagar University, nature, for obvious reasons drew my attention. Nature has always attracted me. But I had no idea that it could be so beautiful and serene. The beauty of it beholds everyone. As it was winter, the lakes were full of migrating birds enriching the already ravishing environment.

But other than nature, one other thing that awed me was the rickshaw culture there. You must be wondering what am I talking about? And why am I using the word culture?

If you visit the campus, rickshaws, all lined up one after the other as if standing in a queue will welcome you. This scene is seen all around the campus, in front of all departments and important buildings. They are truly very disciplined. They wait for their turn for passengers and don't rush to get one. What is more interesting is that one doesn't have to haggle for the fare, as the rickshaw pullers

remain happy with whatever one gives them. The fare is very low as well. The students, who are the commuters, respect the rickshaw pullers and call them Mama (uncle). They also call us either by Khala (Auntie) or Mama. I had a chat with one of them the other day and asked him why he pulled rickshaw in the campus where he earned so little. His answer was one of a kind.

The reasons he stated was there is no chance of accidents within the campus, no pollution, not chaotic environment like outside and most of all for the respect he gets from the students here.

This culture really is one of the many things that make the JU campus a unique one.

Nusrat Rashida
BBA, Jahangirnagar University

Hong Kong to realise our demands from the developed nations. After the fiasco of Cancun declaration we have seen no breakthrough in the pattern of discussion of inter-ministerial meeting of World Trade Organisation, said the Executive Director of a think-tank, at a recent workshop in the city. He stressed the need for concessional facilities in our agricultural sector at the next round of discussion. Mentioning the concession and subsidy provided by US and other European countries he said that Switzerland was subsidising a cow three times more than the daily per capita income of a Bangladeshi. Identifying our lack of negotiation ability with the donor agencies he said it was a technical crisis resulting in failure in most of the cases for attaining our right. Searching adequate incentive from the Hong Kong discussion he also said the next meeting will provide about \$ 280 billion incentives but 60 per cent of this will go to developed countries. Before the next round of

discussion in Hong Kong he detected some problems including trade preference loss worth of \$ 300-400 million, under multilateral discussion, for Bangladesh. Secondly, the down payment in cotton will hike the price of cloth. Narrating the significance of agricultural subsidy for Bangladesh he said among 50 LDC, 40 countries import food to meet local demand and only 14 export agricultural products. Only these 14 countries will get preference from the next meeting. Mentioning Paris discussion as a basis of duty reduction on some specific items he said the next meeting would formulate the process or method how to reduce the duty varying country to country aimed at saving the interest of LDCs. I agree with the suggestion that our government should focus on strengthening our negotiation capacity.

Bazlur Rahman
Mohsin Hall, Dhaka University

In my very first year in the BUET I witnessed a gunfight in the campus between two terrorists groups of my university and the neighbouring Dhaka University, the so-called students. The gunfight was for the possession of a tender. The two leaders of that gunfight were Muki of BUET and Tagar of DU. That gunfight in the campus costs the life of Sabekun Nahar Sony. After that killing, Tagar was arrested in Dhaka but Muki has not been arrested yet. We hear that immediately after the death of Sony, Muki managed to get the shelter of one of the most influential political leaders and was eventually sent abroad. After more than three years of the murder, we notice with the utmost astonishment that the verdict of that case has not been executed. If it is possible for a convict to be granted presidential amnesty with the help of the bigwigs of the ruling party after twenty-two years, it is quite possible that Muki will too be spared the noose. Jintu, a JCD leader was convicted of double murder and

Muki, another JCD leader is accused of only one murder-so it is easier for him to escape the gallows. After reading the news of the Presidential amnesty for a murderer I am haunted by this thought all the time.

Faysal
Sher-e-Bangla Hall, BUET

Let his soul return to his land

You are in deep, divine, eternal sleep. Above you is the vast blue sky. Isn't this the sky that you wanted to conquer? Passing over this sky you wanted to reach your dreamland- Bangladesh. For the sake of the bond of motherland, you severed all the bonds- your cherished fatherhood, your beloved family, your job- everything. You did not think even of your own life.

Being highly emotionally, aroused by patriotism, you wanted to rush with a plane to your country where the struggle for liberation was going on. You just thought about the future not

about the past. You sacrificed yourself for the next generation. You had not reached your own land, before the Pakistanis destroyed your plane. But do you know that those barbaric Pakistanis were be able to destroy your body only, not your spirit and love. Your love and inspiration transcended the borders of Pakistan and sparked the flame of patriotism all over Bangladesh. Today we are independent. Every year we observe our victory with pomp and grandeur. Our generation with their elders shower flowers on the grave of the martyrs, recall their contribution and pray to God for their salvation. But alas! You, who are among the seven most excellent heroes, are deprived of our respect. We cannot put an epitaph on your tomb; we cannot take oath for building our country touching your grave, because you are lying far away from us. The country against which you fought has become your final resting-place.

More than 30 years have

passed since Liberation, but no one could arrange for the return of your body to your Motherland. How insulting it is for us and for our spirit of freedom! Being a daughter of a freedom fighter I am seeking forgiveness from my heart to you for this gross injustice. I promise that what our predecessors couldn't do will be accomplished by us. We shall continue to fight for your due respect until we succeed to make you return to your country.

Dear readers, our great hero Shaheed Matiour's is buried in Pakistan. It is our sacred duty to draw the attention of the government to bring back this hero's remains to Bangladesh. Our expatriate brothers and sisters have taken this commendable initiative.

Sharin Shajahan Naomi
DU