LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA FRIDAY AUGUST 19, 2005

Intelligence failure of epic proportions

The government must take the entire blame

O say that the more than five hundred nearsimultaneous bombings were a case of intelligence failure will be an understatement given the enormity of the incidents that involved all but one of the sixty-four districts of the country. It was a failure of epic proportions that cannot admit of any excuse. The government will have to take the entirety of the blame for this failure.

We are horrified, flabbergasted, awestruck and confounded by the utter incompetence and failures of our security apparatus. It will not be an exaggeration to suggest that those that are entrusted to ensure our security jeopardized it. We are similarly worried to see the operational proficiency of the perpetrators of the 17 Aug bombings, nearly five hundred of whom managed to evade the eyes of the SB, NSI, DGFI, local police intelligence, and other intelligence apparatuses in Bangladesh, and carry out the attacks.

The fact that almost five hundred bombings were carried out must have involved very thorough and laborious logistics and planning. This was not planned overnight, certainly not in seven days. This must have also involved no less than five hundred ground operators, not to speak of the many that were involved in the planning and preparation stages. The whole operations involved movement of men and material over many days to almost five hundred different places and set off in very precisely synchronised a manner. It's all the more ludicrous when, going by the admission of the state minister, the government had taken special measures in view of intelligence reports of possible untoward incidents between 14 and 16 Aug. Surely the perpetrators did not move just on the morning of the 17th but quite possibly during the time when the law enforcing and intelligence agencies were supposed to be more alert than normal. One can only shudder at the state of alertness of our security agencies.

It is even more disconcerting and absurd that the failure occurred in the backdrop of several incidents of the previous vears. There has been, over the last several years, spate of bombings and terrorist acts in which foreign dignitaries were made targets while in some instances senior members of the opposition fell victims. Only last year there was the biggest arms haul in our country, which still remains a mystery, insofar as its destination, source and the brain behind the operation were concerned. August 21 grenade attacks, where 21 people were killed, remain unsolved. Apparently, no action beyond a so-called judicial inquiry has been taken in this regard. Given this background, the failure of our intelligence agencies to get a wind of the operation is as puzzling as deserving a thorough inquest into the affairs of our intelligence apparatus.

The less said about the counter intelligence capability of the relevant intelligence agencies the better. But we will be remiss if the entire responsibility of the failure was laid at the doors of the agencies. We feel that much of the blame must lie squarely on the government for lack of proper direction and also on the shoulders of those responsible for tasking and utilising our intelligence assets. Whatever is the capability of these agencies, in most cases their efforts are misutilised, mostly on political purpose. Instead of performing the counter intelligence work, they are utilised either to snoop on the political opponents or cover someone who has fallen foul of the administration and needs to be sorted out. It is thus no wonder that the real anti-state elements and the evildoers are left free to go about their business of endangering the lives of the citizens.

The intelligence and the security apparatus have totally failed to protect the people and the government of the day; the responsibility for this failure must fall squarely on those at the

Why this hartal?

Cancel it, if you want to be taken seriously

HEN the country is reeling under the most devastating attack on its security and when people in general are panicky and full of doubts as to what will happen next, the opposition in a totally mindless knee-jerk reaction has called for a hartal tomorrow. Why? How does it serve any national purpose? How does it serve to calm the nerves of the highly disturbed population of the country? How does it help to catch the perpetrators of this dastardly act? How does it help even the opposition?

Just when the country is in desperate need of some sober counseling and farsighted leadership and just when the opposition has a golden opportunity to appear matured with the national interest as its highest objective, the AL's call for a hartal boggles the mind of every normal thinking person.

How much more time do we need to learn the basic fact that calling for a hartal serves no purpose, not even that of hurting the government, which appears to be the opposition's only aim. It only hurts the people, not to mention the opposition, as it appears not to care about the plights of the ordinary citizens.

The countrywide bomb blasts have revealed as never before that Bangladesh faces a serious security threat. Hartals, by hurting the economy, only lessens our capacity to fight that threat. A hartal at this moment of crisis is the worst thing the opposition could have called for. Cancel it, and act with the maturity and seriousness that people expect from a party of AL's stature and public standing.

We can't say that we haven't been warned



There can be no doubt (not that there should have been before, but anyway) that there exists a wellorganised movement that wishes to replace our democratic system of government with a religious theocracy, and that they are prepared to use any means necessary

Don't take my word for it -- or that of any other media trouble-maker for that matter. Take their word for

Interestingly enough, though, early indications are that neither the government nor the opposition are doing so.

BNP Standing Committee member Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain laid the blame for the bomb blasts at the door of those "trying to tarnish the image of the country." He did not come right out and implicate the opposition, but his suggestion that the perpetrators "want to create political issues as they don't have genuine issues against the government" echoes earlier

KULDIP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

Manmohan Singh would tender his

apology to Indian Muslims as he had

done in the case of Sikhs for Delhi

riots even after 21 years. The net-

work pointedly referred to the killings

in Guiarat three years ago and the

ones at Mumbai in 1993. My reply

was that the prime minister should

But then I realised that Atal Behar

Vajpayee was the Prime Minister

when the carnage in Gujarat took

place. I knew he was all worked up

against state chief minister Narendra

Modi before he went to Ahmedabad

but settled down to mere expres-

sions of irritation after the visit. By the

time he reached Goa, he was not

even angry. RSS had 'pacified' him.

His ire, in fact, got directed against

at Karachi that Guiarat riots were a

national shame but did nothing

beyond when he was even Deputy

Prime Minister. Modi is still there and

Advani continues to be his ardent

admirer. Not only that, the Muslims in

general and the

riot-victims in particular still suffer

from the state government's deliber-

Again, BJP chief L K Advani said

NF Pakistan TV network

based at Dubai asked me

critiques of the AL and leaves little to the imagination.

Jamaat-e-Islami leaders were Senior party less circumspect. leaders including Secretary General and Cabinet Minister Ali Ahsan M. Mujahid pointed the finger of blame straight at the AL, and asserted that the blasts were part of an opposition plan to make the country politically unstable and bring it into disrepute.

This kind of irresponsible and mendacious accusation is more of

which has made even more

unsupportable claims about previ-

ous terrorist attacks such as the

one on the AL rally last August 21.

The time has come to speak hon-

estly and to stop insulting the

Let's be perfectly frank. If the AL

had the organisational capacity

and internal discipline to pull off

this kind of an attack, it would have

been able to force the government

For its part, the AL is laying the

blame for the bombings squarely at

the feet of the government. Sheikh

Hasina is on record as saving that

"without government involvement

no one could carry out such a

series of bomb blasts in 63 districts

at a time" and opining that culpabil-

might seem, there is another

possibility in terms of how the

Persuasive as this argument

Hurdles in rapprochement

ate policy of discrimination and

denial. Even the rehabilitation is

being done primarily by voluntary

agencies. Something has gone

wrong with Gujarat. The state where

Mahatma Gandhi, an apostle of

Hindu-Muslim unity, was born and

where his Sabarmati Ashram still

radiates with amity is today the most

communally-oriented place. It is

unbelievable that the state which

touched the sublime heights of

pluralism during the Gandhi's Dandi

ity goes all the way to the PM.

intelligence of the country.

from office long ago

government could have let such an attack occur, which given the government's record seems far more likely -- common or garden incompetence

Let's be frank here, too. If the government had the ability to pull this off then one would have expected that it would have been able to do a better job running the country the last few years.

militate against the possibility of government involvement or com-

ment's job to keep us safe and it is clear that this is a duty that it is not meeting. In light of the other terrorist attacks and incidents of the past few years, the government had an even greater duty to take the steps necessary to ensure security, but what the blasts have proved is that the government has done little or

In the second place, a big part of the problem has been that for too

right under its nose.

STRAIGHT TALK

The Jamat-ul-Mujahideen has fired the first shot. The serial bomb blasts need to be recognised as a warning shot

across the bows of the nation. The smart move would be to take heed. This might sound ridiculously obvious, but

the fact is that in the past too many of us have not taken heed of the threat that has been gathering. Let us never again

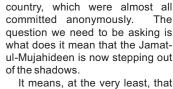
hear anyone say that religious extremists are not active in the country or that they are not a serious threat. After

nothing while the threat has grown

ment's image rather than to strike effectively at the terrorists, is entirely correct

But for all their faults, common sense and political self-interest dictate that neither the AL nor the BNP were behind the bomb blasts. The less time the government and opposition spend trading acrimonious accusations the better

The question that we need to be focused on now is the implications behind this attack: why now, what



an approach is in marked contrast

to earlier terrorist attacks in the

It means, at the very least, that the time is long overdue for us to get serious about this threat. It is not true, as the government has long claimed, that violent extremists do not exist in the country. It is evident that they exist, and are well-funded and well-organised.

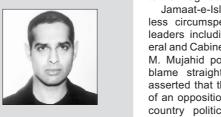
However, neither is it true that there are extremists hiding under every rock and that they are poised to take over the country. The good news is that there is no evidence that the terrorists enjoy any kind of support among the general public. We cannot be complacent but we need not be alarmist either.

But let us hear no more denials of what we all know to be true. The government has brought this on itself due to its perfunctory pursuit of religious extremists in the past. Unfortunately, it has brought this on all of us, too.

The Jamat-ul-Muiahideen has fired the first shot. The serial bomb blasts need to be recognised as a warning shot across the bows of the nation. The smart move would be to take heed. This might sound ridiculously obvious, but the fact is that in the past too many of us have not taken heed of the threat that has been gathering.

Let us never again hear anyone say that religious extremists are not active in the country or that they are not a serious threat. After August 17, we can never again say that we haven't been warned

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.



ZAFAR SOBHAN

HE only possible silver lining to the horrific serial bomb blasts that reached into every nook and corner of the country on August 17 (apart from the fact that the death toll was thankfully low) is that now at least we can perhaps agree that the debate on the presence of religious extremists in Bangladesh, their scope, and their intentions can be

to achieve their ends.

Two more persuasive reasons

plicity with the bomb blasts the same from the government,

August 17, we can never again say that we haven't been warned.

One, the text of the leaflets found as well as the fact that administration and court buildings were principal targets make it clear that the bombers do not consider the current government their friend, regardless of the presence of mainstream religious parties

within the ruling coalition. Two, it is hard to see how the blasts do anything but hurt the incumbent government. The fact that religious extremists have been proved in such dramatic fashion to exist and that the government has apparently zero ability to curb their actions cannot benefit an administration hoping for re-election or trying to project a positive image of

But this is not to say that the government can escape blame for what must be counted as a shocking failure on its part.

its rule to the outside world.

In the first place, the blasts happened on its watch, and so it is

party's bete noire. After all, it is the

same party, which demolished the

Babri masjid and faces criminal

charges. According to Justice

Nanavati, who wrote the 1984 anti-

Sikh riots report, there was no differ-

ence between what happened in

Delhi and Guiarat. In the first, Sikhs

were the victims in the second

Muslims. At both places he found

ample evidence to infer that some

politicians and the police looked the

other way when the crimes were

long the government has insisted that it is not presiding over a time of rising religious militancy. government instead blamed the opposition and the media and "foreign hands" for conspiring against it by fabricating such accounts for their own gain. The truth is that it is the government that has mined this issue for parti-

cost. Third, the government's turning a blind eye to other incidents of religious militancy and its halfhearted pursuit of religious extremists in the past has served only to embolden them.

san gain and we are all paying the

Let us not forget that the Jamatul-Mujiahideen was supposedly banned back in February. It is now clear that what the media has been saying all along, that the government action against the militants, which had left most of the senior leaders untouched, was little more than a public relations stunt

BJP coalition took over in March

1993 and included bomb blasts in

the terms of inquiry. Judge

Srikrishna held Shiv Sena chief Bal

Thackerey guilty for whipping up

communal frenzy through his writ-

ings, pronouncements and direc-

tives. The report recalled his famous

press interview where he had given

a call to throw out Muslims.

Srikrishna pointed out the nexus

between politicians and police in

killing and looting. Thackerey

their campaign, and what does this mean for the future? The first thing to note is that it

do the bombers hope to gain from

seems that the attacks were intended not to cause maximum death and destruction (one can be thankful for small mercies), but to frighten or to send a message. Had the bombs been more powerful, thousands could have been killed or maimed.

It has been speculated that the blasts were a "dry run" for a future more devastating attack. But this makes little sense as one would have thought that the terrorists would not have wanted to tip their hand and alert the citizenry if they wished to inflict maximum casual-

The most likely motivation is that the bombers wished to send a message as to their organisational capacity, reach, and intentions.

The interesting thing is that such

Advani when the Babri Masjid was abolished? Rao gave a measured Seeing three to four lakh people assembling at the Wagah border on reply: "I cannot ban Shiv Sena because it is a political party". As

Whenever I asked in the Raiva

of five years

Sabha about the action taken, Advani, by then Home Minister, would say that the matter was with the State government. It came to be known subsequently that Prime

BETWEEN THE LINES

Today people-to-people contact has come to be the only mantra, which even the diehard on both sides see working. Thousands of Indian people have visited Pakistan and thousands of Pakistanis India. There has never been such an emotional upsurge as is now. Had the two governments allowed people-to-people contact to expand by liberalising visa facilities and lessening police surveillance the limited atmosphere of goodwill would have spread all over. Unfortunately, both Delhi and Islamabad have begun dragging their feet.

Salt March to oust the British, is in the depths of hatred which Advani spread when he led a rathyatra from Somnath temple to Ayodhya. In fact, his rath was the beginning of assaults on India's secular polity. It sowed the seeds of hatred. The nettle of communalism was the natural growth.Ê We have become prey to triviality and an inner shame and cowardice.

I do not think that the BJP would ever apologise. Advani had to pay heavily for commending Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah in Pakistan. How can Advani, or for that matter, any BJP leader say 'sorry' to Muslims who constitute the committed. The pattern was the same: the state was on the side of rioters and the entire killing and looting was systematically organized and executed. I only hope that Nanavati does not produce another wishy-washy report as he did in the case of Delhi riots, condoning the complicity of the top and picking up foot soldiers for punishment.

Manmohan Singh carries the sins of his predecessors in the Congress. Still he must apologise for Bombay riots because the Congress was in power both at the centre and in the state at that time. When the inquiry into the riots was ordered, the Congress was in power. The Shiv Sena-

remained unrepentant and defiant. He not only rejected the report but called the judge biased, a usual reaction of the guilty.

After the report, Advani on behalf of the central government said that there was 'no justification for any action against Thackerey'. I remember that when the killings in Mumbai did not abate for three days, some of us. senior iournalists. met the then Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao to express our concern. He had no doubt about the culpability of the Shiv Sena and Bal Thackerey. But when asked: "Why do not you ban Shiv Sena and arrest Bal Thackerey as you did in the case of RSS and Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi's Principal Secretary, P C Alexander, the then Maharashtra governor, was sitting over the report. Significantly, after retirement, he was elected to the Rajya Sabha, the Shiv Sena giving him crucial votes. That we have not been able to cleanse India's body politics of communalism is my biggest worry because it is coming in the way of normalising relations with Islamahad The fear of maulvi in Pakistan and the RSS in India is still dominating politics in the two countries. The governments on both sides appear to be afraid of them to take bold steps towards rapproche-

the 14-15th August night was a regards Thackerey, he said: "Wait". I heartening experience. I felt all the waited vainly during his entire tenure more elated because we were only 12 persons when the first candle was lighted on the iron gates between India and Pakistan a decade ago The sneering remark at that time was that the mombattiwalas were foolhardy to believe that their endeavour would bring people from both sides Today people-to-people contact

has come to be the only mantra, which even the diehard on both sides see working. Thousands of Indian people have visited Pakistan and thousands of Pakistanis India emotional upsurge as is now. Had the two governments allowed people-to-people contact to expand by liberalising visa facilities and lessening police surveillance the limited atmosphere of goodwill would have spread all over. Unfortunately, both Delhi and Islamabad have begun dragging their feet. Imtiaz Ahmed, a top Pakistani journalist, was not given a visa to join us on the border Nor was the famous Shoba Mudail to sing in Pakistan. Ministers on both sides are speaking out of turn. I do not know what can be done about Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed who said the other day at a seminar in Lahore that he would prefer to go to India in a tank. He and persons like him are the core prob-

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

OPINION

Self-reform to precede organisational reform

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

HE opposition cry for reforms of the caretaker government system and the Election Commission is yet to gain the desired momentum. The government is equally indifferent to the prospect of the demand. On the contrary, it is considered to have been an absolutely hollow pretext to create disaffection among the people and chaos in the country. The plea of the protagonists of reforms to boycott election if their demands are not met, is also dismissed as mere pretensions to avoid inevitable defeat in the election in 2006. At least the prime minister has, till now, been very vocal with such contention. Some of the ministers half-heartedly consider the demands for reforms as totally inconsequential and unnecessary. They would however, like the Awami League, members of the Jatiya Sangsad place their demands in the parliament for a discussion. Evidently, the opposition leadership considers such invitation as a trap to bring them back to the parliament some-

the reform proposition has already created a compiling situation for them to go for a strategic shift in their movement. Belated though. the Awami League leadership seems to have realised that a mass upsurge was urgently needed to unseat the government and hold next election on the basis of the proposed reforms.

Notwithstanding the conviction of the government leadership, visa-vis its abnegating the opposition demand for being 'unnecessary' the funny situation obtaining now in the Election Commission shall have provided a positive additional impetus to the opposition. In this connection we may recall the apparently unsolicited and yet very much spontaneous pleading of the former CEC Abu Sayeed prior to his relinquishing. He told about his bitter experience with the secretary and with the other Election Commissioners who used to report to CEC. For quite sometime there has been a lot of bragging over the 'constitutional position' of CEC. Obviously it was intended to present the incumbent as a very formidable person accountable only to

The cold reception meted out to the President of the Republic. In practice, however, he passed his tenure subservient somehow or other, to the administrative machinerv of the government. The organisational structure of

the Election Commission has provisions for dual control. For instance, the Secretary of the Election Commission Secretariat is reportedly accountable to the Establishment Division of the government. The incumbent, during Mr Abu Sayeed's time was not obliged to take orders from him. Likewise each of the Election Commissioner used to be a sort of independent island freely contesting and even flouting CEC's direc-

Mr M A Sayeed is gone. In his place we have now Justice M A Aziz who too has had a bad start. A lawyer had filed a suit in the High Court challenging his appointment to the position of CEC while still on roll in the highest seat of judiciary. As of now he seems to have good rapport with the secretary but with at least one Election Commissioner, M Mohammad Ali, he appears to have been in trouble. The fixing of election schedule for

45 women members of parliament can be readily cited as an example of a brewing rift. We shall not be surprised if the whole embarrassing scenario on such count during the tenure of M A Sayeed is reenacted to present a yet more invidious clash of personality. Justice M A Aziz commenced

official functions with such a subject as would not have occupied the highest place in his priority list. He arranged a formal meeting with about 70/80 political parties most of which would have no following. Quite a large number among them existed only in paper or as totally domesticated platform. It was indeed a very funny congregation so much so that many of those representing such mushroom organisations couldn't even spell out the official names of the political parties they represented. Awami League and the mainstream opposition parties in the 14party alliance, and in Gano Oikya Forum didn't participate.

The lone item on the agenda was to seek the opinion of the 'invitees' on the voter list. Precisely the CEC wanted to know from them whether or not the existing voter list should be updated or a new voter list should be made. The 4-party alliance represented by minister Khorshed Anwar of BNP suggested that the process for a new voter list be initiated. Although the CEC is yet to decide on the ultimate course a piece of his mind favouring new list is in the air. Here again there is difference of opinion with some of the ECs. The latter feel that there is absolutely no necessity to go for an altogether new list. In their opinion, it shall be colossal wastage of public money, let alone the time involved. Just at this stage of my discus-

sion I had the breaking news from the electronic media. The Chief Election Commissioner was reported to have made his decision in favour of an altogether new voter list. Details about such decision were made available to the public in all the newspapers on August 08, 2005 morning. It was revealed, inter alia, that the CEC took the decision all by himself without a prior consultation meeting with the two election commissioners namely, Mr Mohammad Ali and Mr Munsef Ali. When the file on such unilateral decision was sent to

them, evidently to conform with the routine procedure, one of the ECs was reported to have put his note of dissent on the decision. The rationale for such disagreement was though not available, it could be guessed. Only 2/3 days ago Mr Mohammad Ali, one of the two Election Commissioners, had his decision on election of the women members of Jatiya Sangsad crossed by the CEC and put the former in a lot of embarrassment. It could be a clash of individual ego that got the upper hand.

The cold war between the two went to such an extent that the EC was compelled to cancel his press conference on August 07. The newspapers quoted the private secretaries of the two ECs which read that their bosses were forbidden to talk to any one from the news media. The private secretaries were also reported to have been scared of the secretariat of the election commission. In any case, the note of dissent from EC was reported to have alluded to the ordinance of 1982 in respect of voter list preparation and suggested adherence to that.

The CEC, in defence of his own

was the 'legal authority' to speak to the press, others were not. With an apparent tinge of sarcasm he was also said to have made an oblique reference to one of the Election Commissioner whom he alleged to "convene press conference at home". He thought such a stance as "immoral" as reported in the news media. The psychological as well as egotistic tussle seizing the Election Commission can be said to have been an ignominous extension of the past during the former CEC's time. All these are unfortunately being pursued at the cost of organisational efficiency. By the way, it is interesting to observe that the CEC has taken his decision in exercise of his positional prerogative, yet in full tune with the desire of the present government. One wonders if updating the existing voter list could fairly supplement the necessity or the legitimacy of an absolutely new one instead. We shall have to watch and see if the decision sparks off another spate of resentment among the opposition and makes their demand for reform of the Election Commission stronger still.

decision, said to the press that he

its footsteps meticulously, have been reaping fabulous dividends adhering to corporate governance. There is practically no scope for any boss on earth to get the desired results towards fulfilling organisational objectives ignoring his supporting staff. Else, in the present case, the CEC will continue to find himself in a perpetua 'hornet' nest and eventually embrace unfathomable disgrace to lament for the rest of his life. Once the ultimate impact of a stubborn dispensation is honestly appreciated, the step to follow shall be restricting the organisation and asking for total freedom to work relieving it from the present dual accountability. Hopefully, the CEC will make a rethinking and get back to the tested track of modern man-

The whole world, particularly the

developed one and those following

Kazi Alauddin Ahmed is a management