

Religious militancy: What are we in for?



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Hunting down the extremists

A matter of political will

THE government cannot say that it had no inkling of the character and extent of the extremist threat to the nation. Starting revelations as to the number of extremists, the sophistication of their organisation, and the nature of their combat training have been in the headlines of the country's newspapers for quite some time now. Nor was this information unknown to the intelligence agencies and other law enforcement authorities.

There have been countless incidents in which extremists have been apprehended, sometimes with arms and explosives, only to have been released by the authorities, and many instances of the extremists operating with the collusion or acquiescence of local authorities.

We sincerely hope that the recent serial bomb blasts have convinced the government of the need to get serious about the threat that the nation faces. There are many potentially fruitful avenues to explore with regard to the country's terror infrastructure that the government should waste no time in pursuing.

The first of these is the financing of these terror networks -- where their funding comes from and how and to whom it is disbursed.

The second area the government needs to gather intelligence on is the organisational structure of the networks to fully understand just how they operate and to fully comprehend their reach and strength.

Third, the government needs to trace the route by which disaffected youth end up in these groups -- who are the leaders and recruiters who bring them into the fold and what is the means by which a law-abiding and peaceful citizen is convinced to take up arms against the state.

These are all investigations which could and should have been taken up long ago. The government had enough information at hand to realise the extent of the crisis and could have vigorously pursued the extremists if it had had the political will to do so.

There must be no repetition of past mistakes. The political will must be summoned. The investigation procedure must be non-political and non-partisan so as to maximise its efficiency -- no matter where the evidence leads. After all a politicised and compromised investigation that leads nowhere will harm the government more than anyone else.

Abominable exploitation

No more child jockeying

ANOTHER 22 Bangladeshi children employed as camel jockeys in the UAE have returned home. This follows the return on August 11 of 36 children who had been trafficked out of the country to be used as camel jockeys.

The home-coming of the hapless boys is reported to be the outcome of an agreement between Unicef and the UAE government. Stories of the child jockeys suffering or even dying were carried by the media many times in the past. But the cruel sport was not stopped, though there could be no worse violation of child rights than killing or maiming them in the name of a sport.

Now, some questions need to be answered before we can determine why the barbaric sport still continues in the so-called civilised countries. Why did the law enforcers fail to stop child trafficking from the country? A large number of them were taken out of the country, but the law enforcers seem to have no clue as to what was happening. The traffickers were clearly banking on the gullibility and vulnerability of the parents and guardians or, in extreme cases, they might have given in to the temptation of earning some money in exchange for their children. It has long been known as a death trap for children, but awareness could not be created among the masses about the ruthlessness of the rackets behind and organisers of the camel races. It is at the level of communities that ramparts must be built against trafficking of children and women.

The Unicef deserves credit for taking the initiative to put an end to the business of employing children as camel jockeys. However, it has to be ensured that such activities are stopped once and for all. The Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association is playing a laudable role in protecting the rights of children. It is the duty of all concerned to extend cooperation to them so that the budding lives are no longer wasted in the barrenness of the deserts where there is nobody to show an iota of sympathy for these little boys.

ment, dismissing all such possibilities out of hand.

This is what we said not so long ago: "One cannot help notice the reluctance of many in the administration to acknowledge the possible existence of extremist groups in Bangladesh, with strong religious motivations, capable of carrying out violence. Such remarks display an ostrich like attitude when it comes to acknowledging the presence of extremist elements in our country.

embarrassing the government, to the government's hand in the episode with ulterior motives, to laying the blame on the opposition, have been heard from various quarters, including politicians belonging to the two major political parties. Some think that these are but efforts to embarrass the government and spoil the image of the country.

Rushing to judgment or mutual blame game has never been helpful in addressing an issue that has very

deny the link do so at the peril of the country's security.

Those in a hurry to disprove the link between the proscribed militant group and the bombings, cite the fact that such an operation would involve a deep-rooted organisational set-up with countrywide tentacles spread at the grassroots, with a highly organised and intelligent core group, with plenty of funds and intelligence capabilities. Well, that is what begs the question. Why

successfully. Taking of lives was deliberately avoided to prevent their actions becoming counter-productive.

That this group is linked with the other bombings in Bangladesh cannot be said with certainty. But if they were, and did not announce their presence in the manner they did this time, this was perhaps because they had not acquired the sophistication or were established on the ground strongly enough to do

editorialised by the DS. Or else, the warnings were indeed picked up but went unheeded by those at the helm of affairs. On both counts the folly is inexcusable, given the fact that the administration was in a state of alert between August 14 and 16. For the bombers to put their plan into operations, without being noticed, while our security forces were supposed to be more vigilant, speaks of the crass callousness with which security is addressed in our country.

We have been constantly calling for the revitalisation of the intelligence agencies. Those who know will not disagree that our counter-intelligence capabilities are very thin on the ground. And whatever little there is has been even more dissipated by being tasked for missions that are more political and extraneous to the work of these agencies.

There are two things that the government must do posthaste. Without indulging in any further denial game it should devote all its energies to get after these so-called Islamists and seize them before they do more harm to the country. Their political ideology, that stems from their own religious beliefs, has nothing to do with the teachings of Islam.

Equally important is to get to the bottom of the unmitigated intelligence failure that for almost two hours plunged the country in a state of utter helplessness. It's time the government woke up to the realities on the ground.

Otherwise, our worst fears may well come to pass.

The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Something very bad was the reply to a friend's query to me following the spate of bombings of August 17. This is perhaps the most elaborately planned bombing operation not only in Bangladesh, but also in the region, and perhaps ever seen anywhere in the world. One wonders whether an external enemy would have been able to conduct so many raids with such precision within a span of such a short time. This was also the first instance of bombings in Bangladesh since 1999, responsibility of which has been accepted by an outlawed religious militant group.

What has been a matter of inference and supposition thus far has now come to be proved. That there were underground radical Islamic militant groups, with the purpose of establishing a theological state, through violent means, has been finally exposed through the almost five hundred near-simultaneous bombings in all the sixty four districts save one, on August 17. The likelihood of other latent militant groups in the country cannot be discounted either.

The possibility that such a group exists in Bangladesh has been a matter of public discourse, discussion, and debate in the media over the last several years, and a matter of constant denial by the govern-

Acknowledging the possibility of the presence of religious extremists in Bangladesh does not adversely affect our image abroad. What sullies our reputation, not to speak of the grave implications these have for our national security, are acts like the one we witnessed in Habiganj recently." (DS Feb 3, 2005).

Recent reports on their presence and operation have confirmed our apprehensions.

As usual the two major parties have not minced words in laying the blame on each other. It seems they have no doubt as to who were behind the acts of August 17. It is a pity that neither has any proof to substantiate their claims. That is not surprising either. Thus to the common man such utterances are not only uncalculated, these are also very irresponsible.

Not only the political parties, but also many informed members of the public see the purpose behind these acts in a very narrow way. All manner of explanations from spoiling the lawyers' programme of the day, to

serious implications for our national security. There is indeed a deep-rooted conspiracy that is aimed not merely at the image of the country or the party in power. There is also more to it than merely creating panic. Their aim is to strike at the very foundation of Bangladesh as a state and as a nation.

Even now some would like to discount the link between the leaflets found at the site of the bombings and the perpetrators, because of the fact the persons behind these terror bombings would hardly be expected to leave their signature behind. Those who fail to see the link between the bombings and the leaflets, and are as yet unable to identify the perpetrators, are fooling nobody but themselves. There is very little doubt about the group behind these bombings. It has made no secret at all of its intentions and of its motivations and religious-political compulsions, which it expounded through the leaflets found at the places of the blasts. Those who prefer to continue to

are we discounting the possibility that there is exactly such a group with all the above-mentioned attributes in existence in Bangladesh? Does not the well synchronised bombings prove the very argument that these people are trying to offer against such a possibility?

Let's elucidate certain aspects of the bombicides in a bit more detail to see if those arguments are tenable. I believe there are four things that have been made abundantly clear and that which all, particularly those at the helm of affairs, must take note of.

First, this was a way announcing the presence of the group, quite in keeping with the tactics of any terrorist or militant entity. Their presence is generally announced in a spectacular way, and nothing could have been more spectacular than detonating nearly 500 bombs near-simultaneously. The purpose of the militants is not only to make us aware of their existence, but also to make the government appear helpless, which they have done

so until now.

Second, they have demonstrated their ability and competence very clearly by outwitting and outfoxing the intelligence and security agencies.

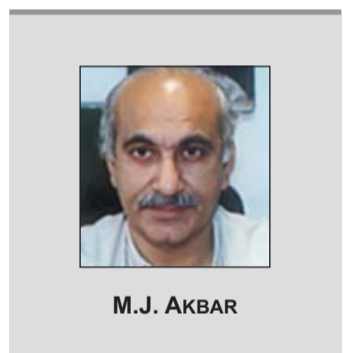
Third, one is left in no doubt that here is a group that is highly organised and disciplined.

Fourth, it has been amply demonstrated that the group has an extensive network that extends to all corners of the country.

However, there are perhaps compelling reasons to believe that this group is not without its sponsors. Such an organised group can hardly operate without their local patron, but more importantly, without foreign sponsors such as a profound and extensive action would not have been possible. But one wonders about the level of public support for their cause.

As for the intelligence failure, there are two conclusions that one can draw. One, it was really a failure of "epic proportions that admits of no excuses" as so aptly

Half empty



M.J. AKBAR

IN a democracy it makes much more sense to believe that the glass is half-empty rather than half-full. It is the empty part of the glass that determines election results. The half-full section chatters and pontificates. The other half votes.

The best thing that Mrs Sonia Gandhi has done in the fifteen months of the present Parliament is to lead the passage of the rural employment guarantee scheme for 2005. It is the government of Dr Manmohan Singh which will pass this legislation and find the money for it. But the identification in the popular mind will be with Mrs Gandhi. Opposition parties have had the sense not to oppose the measure, and quibbles will not help them. It might mean only a meagre three rupees a day, as Nitish Kumar pointed out, but it is three rupees more than he provided when in power for six years.

Facts don't change. But the way you look at them makes a critical difference. The NDA gave wide currency to its claim that it had reduced the number of Indians below the poverty line from over 400 million to some 300 million. If, instead of advertising that as an

achievement it had repositioned the fact as a challenge and as a national disgrace (which it is; try explaining the meaning of freedom to those who cannot find enough to eat), it might have connected better with the country. There is a difference between the constituency of a political party and the constituency of a government. The best politicians know the difference, and also know how to improvise a median between the two. A party's political base is, very accurately, partisan; a

bother about the vote of the people. Even the most capitalist economies buy peace with their disadvantaged through fiction. What else is the dole, or the unemployment benefit, in the West? The state, using tax revenues, takes the responsibility for the inability of the economy to provide full employment. The government robs Peter to pay Paul to prevent Paul from turning violent and wrecking the peace without which neither Peter nor the government can survive.

If the Congress therefore wants to convert populist measures into political capital, then it must do so while they remain popular, before time and venality have turned the sheen into rust. Logically speaking, if there is a guaranteed employment scheme in August, can general elections be far behind?

Mrs Sonia Gandhi's window of opportunity is open. The onerous image of the government has dimmed for the usual reasons,

to do with Jinnah. The weight of incumbency is a difficult burden for any party, and impossible to bear for a party that is floundering. The Congress can easily add to its numbers in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat if elections are held in the next few months. But the BJP's problems cannot be a permanent fact. If a week is a long time in politics, then a year is a lifetime. Rebirth is a natural law of Indian politics. The Congress should know that much.

risk with the vegetable market?

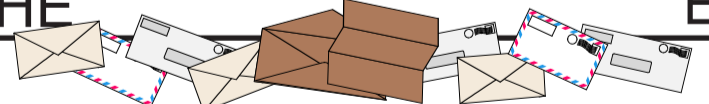
Then there is the enormous value of pre-emption. A patch-up coalition government is always in a state of temporary truce. Mrs Sonia Gandhi not only has to worry about the sudden emergence of a Third Front, but also flakes from her own party floating towards new directions. (If Shankersinh Vaghela does unite with Keshubhai Patel to form a regional party in Gujarat it would finish, at least for one election, both the BJP and the Congress.)

The alternative is to let sleeping coalitions lie. If only they would lie in peace we might even accept the lies necessary to sustain that peace. This is what the seniors in the Congress, enjoying a late-life lottery win, would like. It is not a prescription for the future. Once the politics of Delhi would impact on the states; today the politics of every state impacts on Delhi. Whatever the results in Bihar, there will be ensuing tremors in Delhi. Pranab Mukherjee is trying to bring Mamata Banerjee back into the Congress, which will not endear the Congress to the CPI(M). Ashfit in Gujarat could echo in Delhi. Such rifts can be papered over, but they do not add up to sustainable governance.

A window of opportunity does not remain open for too long. By this time next year the window could be shut by the force of tomorrow's storms. The Congress has the chance of turning a fortuitous coalition into a stable alliance. It is up to the party to seize what is visible instead of wandering into a gathering fog.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

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.

Certifying healthcare providers

This write-up is in response to the Point-Counterpoint article "A Call for Certifying Healthcare Providers" by Dr. Syed Saad Andaleeb. The healthcare industry in Bangladesh recently has been receiving a lot of flak for the disregard for safety, malpractice and of course most importantly the lack of accountability that exists in the system. The author brings up a crucial topic of certification to keep physicians and care providers up to date, similar to those faced by their counterparts in other countries.

One thing that must be taken note of is that the process of certifying and holding healthcare providers and institutes accountable via certification to provide better service, according to the writer, is to primarily increase consumer trust in the industry. Zeenat Z. Syed UPS eDeployment

Gas supply in cylinder

This is in reply to the letters of Mr. AKM Saifuddin and Ms. Anjana published on 20 July 2005. The fact is that it is too late for our finance minister to implement his plan. As we have already used most of our gas reserves. If we cannot explore new gas fields the remaining gas will be finished in 10-15 years. We burn gas worth thousands of taka not only to save one stick of match but also for our carelessness as we pay a fixed amount of money for using an unlimited amount of gas.

Please keep in mind that gas supply via pipeline will be profitable if you can find many customers. But there are many areas in Bangladesh where the number of customers will be 50% less than expected, which will cause loss to gas companies. Gibran Mahmood Notre Dame College, Dhaka

Why this clemency?

The recent outcry of newspapers, regarding the presidential clemency given to a powerful man of the ruling party, followed by Mr. Moudud Ahmed's lame speeches to defend the decision, drew my attention. To make the clemency acceptable, Mr. Moudud commented that a verdict given under the martial law is not acceptable.

Well said, but does it mean that all the people who got punishment under the martial law during the military rule were innocent? Surely not. Alamamun North South University, Dhaka

Pitfalls of sumptuousness

Many swanky eateries have mushroomed in Dhaka City lately. Typically it is a booming business in this city, as many of the city dwellers are gourmets. But we have been horrified at some investigative news in your paper. The mobile courts formed by the

government have penalised many posh hotels and business houses for their monkey business with the food items. We came to know that all the food items, from drinking water to vegetables, are toxic.

The nefarious business people mix different toxic chemicals to enhance their profits. They do not maintain the minimum hygiene standards. Molla Mohammad Shaheen Dept of English, DU

Concern for humanity

It's a reply to the letter written by Farad, IUB, Dhaka. In his write-up Mr. Farad questioned why our writers are so concerned about Arabs who didn't show any positive attitude during our liberation war. I think our writers are more concerned about the fate of humanity than that of Arabs. The character of the Arabs that we observed during the liberation war was the character of their western-allied leaders

but perhaps not of the common masses. Whatever may be the nature of Arabs, do you support the atrocities committed against them? The attack on Iraq is nothing but a new style of imperialism under the veil of world peace. Kamrul, BUET

Standard of education in rural areas

The standard of education is decreasing in rural areas. If you look at it, you will find that most of the university students come from urban areas. Just an example: in my department I found only two out of 30 having a rural background. It was almost 10 years ago. I am sure the number has now gone down to almost zero. I have heard lots of stories about my father's school and his teachers. I can recollect their names though I never saw anyone of them. But villages have lost their past glory and are not producing many good students these days.

Choyan On e-mail Well done, girls

I am a woman, very happy to notice the high percentage of girls obtaining good academic results in SSC exams!

I hope the girls will do even better in future and break the vicious cycle of male domination. Dr. Lailun Nahar Dhaka 1207

Foreign words and phrases

I refer to Syed Badrul Haque's letter on this topic (23 Aug). A living thriving language must evolve like its speaking inhabitants with the interaction within their environment. So importation of foreign words and phrases for an exact expression for which an equivalent does not exist indigenously should not be looked down upon, because that will restrict the thought process and broadening of minds. In the Bangla town (Tower

Hamlets) area of London many Sylheti (known in the press here as Bangladeshi) words and phrases are now knocking out the native Cockney dialect, and the academic opinion recently expressed in the TV, press and other media in Britain is that 'It is only natural and all right!'. English (British or American) has become the richest language on earth because of such importation of foreign words and phrases.

Widening of minds and the absorption of foreign words and phrases cannot be a bad thing unless it is used for showing off erudition unnecessarily. Shafi Ahmed London, UK

A confused nation

I strongly agree with Rubaiyat Hossain on her August 23 article "Philosophical crisis: a confused Bengali nation". Thanks to the writer for taking the bold and brave step to identify one of our major crises. We need more writings like

this in BANGLA so that the general people can read and understand. We always had and have problems but the saddest part is that neither our leaders nor the citizens have tried (honestly) hard enough to get out of it. We often blame others for our problems and I think that's dangerous. We are number one in corruption, over populated, cities are dirty/unplanned, pollution is rising, price hike is there, health & education systems are collapsing, and we have religious blindness/extremism and so on.

As a nation we need to be united and strong. I hope we rise up together to fight poverty, corruption and that's the kind of JIHAD we need. If we fail to realise our faults and don't take honest initiatives to correct these, our problems will never be solved. Reza Rahman On e-mail