

Government's admission a good sign

A sincere, unrelenting follow-up needed now

THE government's open admission, after nine days of investigation into the serial bombings, to Jama'atul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) being responsible for the blasts, on the face of it, sounds like a statement of the obvious. The leaflets left at the sites bore the mark of JMB and the interrogation of the detainees and suspects yielded that organisation's name and that of its chief Sheikh Abdur Rahman as the mastermind.

There is, however, more to it than two and two making four. And, that's where one can pin hopes on to take the investigation process forward. The countrywide rattling attacks were seemingly a calibrated reaction to the government's own limited move to take on extremist ideologues or men of action like Ghalib. In their eagerness to drop a message, the organisers of August 17 bombings didn't mind betraying some of their recruits to the police taking what looks like a miscalculated risk. The investigators obviously had something to go on with.

The concrete and definitive conclusion, drawn on the basis of interrogations of suspects to-date, marks just the beginning of a focused investigation process. A serious manhunt has to be undertaken, if necessary with international assistance, to ferret out Sheikh Abdur Rahman, against whom a warrant of arrest has been issued and, also Bangla Bhai who having been earlier caught twice was let off through weakened, influenced prosecution.

Actually, the intelligence agencies have been advising the government since 2003 on the terrorist threats. The mainstream media never flinched from its professional obligation to highlight the clandestine training and preparatory operations of religious extremist groups from time to time. A lot of space was devoted to JMB. Now, the suspects picked up are themselves confirming from their direct knowledge what the newspapers have been saying so far about the depth and reach of the Jama'atul Mujahedin Bangladesh, defying its outlawed status.

The fact that the government didn't act on newspaper reports and warnings apparently signalled by the intelligence agencies, probably thinking it would entail a political cost, has now, hopefully, broken out of the mental block. It should go the whole hog in dismantling religious extremism, root and branch. But let's not forget that there are lobbies, layers and sub-layers astride the BNP-led coalition government's inner thought-processes. What the government crucially needs -- to be effective on its follow-up mission -- is a well-thought-out, unified policy approach to deal with extremist threats that are quintessentially international.

Community clinics

Make them operational on a priority basis

THOUGH the limping health sector could have been greatly benefited by the commissioning of the 10,000 community clinics built during the past Awami League government's tenure, the project has not been made operational so far. The failure amounts to depriving the people of the healthcare service that the government was committed to providing, after a huge amount of money had been spent for building the community clinic infrastructure. The money spent for the project will turn out to be a sheer wastage of the country's limited resources if the clinics are not made operational.

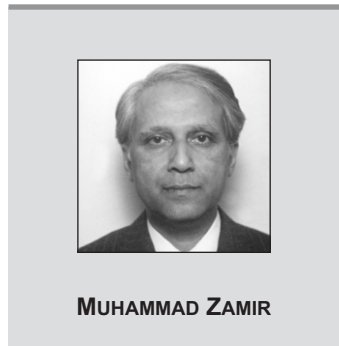
Experts have been unanimous in their view that the community clinics can provide the much needed healthcare services to the rural poor. However, the government's unwillingness to move ahead with the plan suggests that it is influenced by political consideration of the most inexplicable kind. It shouldn't have at all bothered about who initiated the project, rather its merits should have been taken into consideration. Obviously, welfare of the people has to take precedence over all other considerations.

People have to trust the government, and just because an election brings a new party to power, the positive aspects of the good work done by the previous government cannot simply evaporate into thin air. In this particular instance, people are not getting a valuable service and a huge amount of money is on the verge of being totally wasted.

The government should respond to the suggestions offered by the experts on the issue. One very dominant theme in the experts' views is community participation in running the clinics. Obviously, the government has to provide the initial logistic support, but the experience of NGOs in running over 40 clinics suggests that decentralisation and community participation could be an integral part of hospital management in rural areas.

The community clinics can be a valuable addition to our health infrastructure that is not capable of catering to the needs of a huge population. So the government has to find ways of opening them to patients without wasting any more time.

Iraq moves into uncharted territory



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

bringing stability within Iraq is another.

Despite some agreement on basic principles, little substantive progress has been made on the thorny questions of reconfiguring the electoral process to ensure greater Sunni representation in the government or getting Iraq's Arab neighbours to negotiate a settlement with hard-line Sunni groups. In addition to this, there are the issues of self-determination in the Kurdish

by the end of this year.

The US Administration's active intervention in the constitution formulation has underlined its current anxiety and unease. Nearly 1850 US troops have been killed in Iraq since March, 2003 (when the war began). A recent 'Newsweek' survey has also indicated that around 61 per cent of Americans disapprove of how President Bush is handling Iraq. Cindy Sheehan's (the mother of a US soldier killed in

It also assumes that much more significance given the impact of continuing unrest within Iraq on the neighbouring region.

The 'Coalition of the willing' needs to remember that their original hypotheses for going into Iraq -- the presence of weapons of mass destruction -- turned out to be a hoax. This has affected their credibility. Now the spin doctors are talking of the need for democracy and political reform. God knows

ity Council resolution 1546, some coordination is being attempted by the UN. However, quite clearly, it is not enough. They have provided some support to the constitutional committee, but active inter-action is hardly evident. Some UN officials have suggested that there could have been greater involvement of the UN, had such a chance been given to them, particularly with regard to the decision-making process. The transitional govern-

we are trying to train the security and military forces. If we can do that, our people can come home.'

What the former President has over looked is the complexity and the difficult terrain that characterises Iraq politics today. Fundamental divides remain. Conflicting aspirations, based on sectarian religious persuasions and desire for greater political autonomy have not yet been resolved. Extremists continue to draw attention through terrorist acts aimed at inflicting maximum damage irrespective of the nature of the target. The indigenous security apparatus is also far from ready and capable in being able to contain the continuing threat to internal stability in Iraq.

In the meantime, the world is getting restive about continued occupation. An example of this was the statement of Russian President Putin on 18 August calling for an international conference on Iraq by year's end and a timetable for withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq. Through this Russia is probably trying to boost its credentials in the Middle East as a member of the international Quartet. It also implies general concern about the presence of 'occupying forces'. The silence of Arab countries and others from the region on Putin's comment is an indirect vote in favour.

Conditions on the ground can only improve when the neo-con policy makers in the US Administration, particularly in the Departments of State and Defence realise that the process of political reform can move ahead solely through consolidation of multilateral engagement. It is here that Secretary Rice can lay an effective role.

In this context, it would be that much better not generating more avenues of tension in the neighborhood. Threats of armed intervention in other countries of the region will only exacerbate a bad situation further. The military and political tracks are so entwined that problems on one can easily derail the other.

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ACCORDING to reports, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has been comparing the US Administration's drive to implant democracy in the Middle East to the policies devised by former Secretary of State George Marshall to combat communism in Europe after World War II. In her speeches there is an air of 'moral purpose.' This has been specially reflected in her recent observations about what is taking place in Iraq.

Both President Bush and Secretary Rice believe that 'insurgents' are 'losing steam' as a political force and that adoption of the constitutional draft will conclusively move Iraq towards prosperity and democracy. They are confident that the ability of the Opposition to kill and maim will gradually be contained. They feel that the ensuing political process will end chaos and restore discipline-- at least sufficient enough for the USA to start repatriating their troops back home. There is a contingency plan (as explained by General Schoomaker on 21 August) that the US Army might maintain the current number of soldiers for four more years, but it is being hoped that it will not be necessary.

Unfortunately, such optimism appears to be more of a mirage than reality -- at least for the moment. It is true that Secretary Rice because of her socio-metric overlay and proximity to the powers-that-be within the White House has made the State Department, comparatively, a more important factor in decision making. However, soothing public friction between the USA and its historical allies is one thing and

zone, distribution of oil-income, decentralisation of governance within a federal system and lastly the future role of Islamic clerics within the socio-political-legal dynamics. It must not also be overlooked that though the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (the biggest Shiite political party) supports federalism, it is opposed not only by the major Sunni figures but also by Prime Minister al-Jaafari's Dawa party and the movement of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

These significant elements have probably led Senator Joseph Biden, the top Democrat on the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee to state on 15 August, that judging by the way things were unfolding in Iraq, democracy 'will not happen in my lifetime.'

US Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad has been playing a central role in trying to bring rival Iraqi political groups together. His efforts were nevertheless insufficient in getting the constitutional drafting process completed by the due date of 15 August. A constitutional draft of sorts will eventually be submitted for referendum. It is expected to open the door to new legislative elections

Iraq in April 2004) presence and protest outside Bush's vacation home in Crawford, Texas has also lent urgency to the situation. It has galvanised national attention and will certainly not help the White House cause.

One thing remains starkly clear. The trauma of violent response continues in Iraq. This is borne out by the statement made by a US Commander on 12 August that the number of road side bomb attacks against American convoys in Iraq had doubled in the past year to about 30 per week. Most of the detonations are also apparently being carried out by remote control. Terror is not only stalking the streets of Baghdad. It is walking with impunity in most districts of the country.

This is a phenomenon which demands not only the crafting of a constitution but also greater understanding, patience and a deeper spirit of reconciliation.

This is important, given the fact that unrest and disaffection are best settled politically rather than militarily. Taking on board Sunni sentiments, in the long run, will pay dividends and enable USA to exit from Iraq with some modicum of dignity.

that, at least in this, they are correct. However, the quest for a proper exit and ensuring continuity of US interests will not be that easy.

'USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll' have come up with a sobering statistic last month. They found in their survey that a majority of Americans believe that the USA cannot win the war nor establish a democratic government in that country. I will not say that the 'Vietnam rose' has started to bloom in continental USA. It is, however, true that various leaders all over the world, as well as common folk in the USA, are expressing their anxiety.

A poll carried out on 9 August by CNN has underlined that (by a margin of 57 to 34 per cent) most Americans believe that the Iraq war has made their country more vulnerable to terrorist attacks. For the first time a record 33 per cent have also suggested that all troops should be pulled out of Iraq. I am certain that the US Administration is following these changes in the public mood with great care.

Unfortunately, one does hear very much about the efforts being undertaken in that war-ravaged country by the United Nations. It is true that, consistent with UN Secu-

ment in Iraq and the 'Coalition of the willing' will know better. All I can note, as an observer, is that, if this is the case, then, the existing policy is wrong. The US would do itself a favour by facilitating a wider role for the UN mechanism in Iraq and giving them the opportunity to be seen as an active partner of the emerging Iraqi leadership.

Playing hard-ball the Kissinger way, according to some, is not longer the best approach. The former Secretary of State might still believe in the axiom that 'guerillas win if they do not lose' and that 'stalemate is unacceptable'. He might also think that 'victory over the insurgency is the only meaningful exit strategy.' However, these sentiments do not quite mirror the growing 'emotional exhaustion' within the US over Iraq. His views should consequently be best treated with caution.

President Clinton, on 11 August, in his intellectual manner has also tried to simplify the scenario. He feels that the US should strive to help create an Iraq that is 'free independent and at peace.' He has also described that task ahead in very simple terms -- 'They are trying to come up with a constitution and

Political bombshell

FARID BAKHT

HAS anyone nominated Bangladesh for the Guinness World Records for the events of August 17? On that day, nearly 500 explosions took place in 63 out of 64 districts, all within a 30-minute period. The following day, the last district, Munshiganj, also witnessed explosions. This was conducted with military precision. Considering the scale of the operation, casualties were minimal at two deaths and 100 injuries. Causing maiming and death was obviously not the purpose. But what was the agenda?

The targets chosen were primarily government buildings or institutions. Foreign or Western institutions were not on the whole threatened. Initially, people were more mystified than frightened. Political violence is not new since bombings and assassinations first made their entry in 1997. Nevertheless, the sheer audacity, reach and synchronisation have shaken everyone out of their complacency. This was meant to be a signal, a wake-up call. Forces outside the conventional mainstream are active and possess the power to influence the future of the country. In the continuing political crisis in the country where general strikes (hartals) are normal and called regularly, extra-constitutional

forces are letting us know that they are "players" too in politics. They wanted to send an unequivocal message that they must be taken seriously by the mainstream and not relegated, as up till now, as an isolated "loony fringe."

The usual suspects have been identified as the culprits -- the banned Islamic armed movement, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). However, the sheer

desire yet has the power to capture state power as the Maoists are threatening to do in Nepal. But the question being asked is: is this a shot across the bow to ready us for a real challenge a few years down the road? Are we talking 10 years or as little as five?

Who benefits?

The JMB may be the ones who "pulled the triggers" so to speak.

a very powerful lobby is able to protect radical movements from arrest or scrutiny.

No investigation will succeed, as we have seen with previous incidents all leading to a dead end. This shortcoming is not restricted to the current regime. The previous Awami League government, too, failed to bring to justice those responsible during its tenure from 1996 to 2001.

strike again. Given the volatile political situation, which is set to worsen this winter, we could see more bombings, this time with the possibility of horrendous casualties.

So one wonders, who will benefit if elections do not take place? That leads to a conclusion that they lie outside the likely winners of any election, that is, beyond the two main parties.

It is about recognition of a parallel force that is able and prepared to offer a challenge. So far they lack an acceptable message. The people of Bangladesh are not ready or willing to accept a theocratic Islamic state. The question is: are they willing to defend democracy in the next 12 months, or will they be indifferent to a changing of the guard?

scale of the operation leads many to conclude that others are involved, particularly foreign groups.

In no other country in the world has such a bombing campaign been conducted by a domestic movement. Consider the revolutionary movements in South Asia, such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (India). None has been able to coordinate a similar operation. The only equivalent is the Maoist forces in Nepal, which have been able to take over two thirds of the country and encircle the capital city at all.

To put it into perspective, no underground movement in Bangla-

But who gave the orders? The intelligence agencies have been heavily criticised for their failure to warn the government. That seems harsh. Several thousand people were involved in the bombings, using timer devices. They had to be trained, financed, transported, housed and been in communication with their colleagues. How could all this go unnoticed? It is therefore logical to assume that the agencies did know something was up. For example, the Home Minister initially said that he had prior information. He subsequently changed the story to having received no warning beforehand. There is a common perception that

Where do we go from here? We need to consider who would benefit from such an event and what its consequences will be.

The two main political parties, the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party alliance and the opposition Awami League, have publicly accused each other. Not only is it cheap, it is inaccurate. Neither party can possibly benefit from such instability. The local organisations of both parties are in shambles and not ready for campaigning in elections set for January 2007. In fact, one wonders how elections can take place in such an environment? One presumes the perpetrators have a strategy and are able to

Democracy in serious peril

Though Bangladesh had been able to conduct three general elections since 1991 in a relatively free and fair manner, the country has been in permanent political crisis. Given that politics is Dhaka-centric, this has been accepted as a necessary evil by a growing urban middle class. They have benefited from the success of the ready-made-garments industry and the retail and real estate boom in the capital, partly fueled by illegal diversion of aid money. However, the escalation of prices of basic essentials, the rampant corruption and the general insecurity of a tense city

means that this support has all but vanished and hit rock bottom. Dissatisfaction with the status quo is widespread, across all sections.

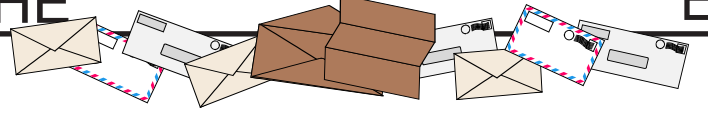
Beyond the capital, the rural economy is in the doldrums as small-scale farming ceases to make sense as a business or a livelihood. The villages have been ignored. The general population has not seen the benefits of aid or export earnings filter down to them. After 14 years, democracy has not produced the goods.

We have had a few days to gauge popular reaction since the bombings. So far, there has not been any serious condemnation by the majority of ordinary people. Sure, many political groups are bringing out demonstrations against the bombings, especially the Islamic parties. But how much of this is being enacted solely for the media? The talk in the tea-stalls, restaurants and village markets is not about public anger. On the contrary, it is about recognition of a parallel force that is able and prepared to offer a challenge. So far they lack an acceptable message. The people of Bangladesh are not ready or willing to accept a theocratic Islamic state.

The question is: are they willing to defend democracy in the next 12 months, or will they be indifferent to a changing of the guard?

Farid Bakht is founder of FuturBangla Network

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.

Our education system

Today's world is a changing one. To keep pace with the changing world we have to change our education system. If this change comes frequently and casually then this would fail to make any appeal among the people rather create embarrassment.

Now such change or reform is frequent in the education system of Bangladesh. Within seven to eight years, we have experienced several changes i.e. communicative English, Grading system and so on.

In 1999, the government introduced communicative system at secondary level and in 2001 in higher secondary syllabus. This system caused a lot of controversies among the people. The main benefit of it is that there is no opportunity to copy in the exams and only the eligible students can pass out. Besides, considering the importance of traditional grammar and literature based system, which was no less

important than this communicative system, in our country there is no proper practice of four skills of communicative system such as listening, reading, writing and speaking. Most of the teachers of our country are not trained, before any change we need to make our teachers trained, so that they can make our students efficient.

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"Lesson that city bombers need to learn"

A write-up under such caption had been published in your daily by Liaquat Ali Khan. The very language of this article has flummoxed and astounded me to the fullest. Mr. Khan's theory of morality is vague, nondescript and divorced from reality. Theory of motion, pro-

pounded by Newton connotes an automated opposite reaction. It is an osmotic, but equal ricochet-- no more, no less. But, terrorism is not an automatic reaction; rather it is a budding mental metamorphosis that develops into a putative sentimentality that crosses the rubicon. In the case of Newton's Law of Motion, there is no change of force or the reversing destination is not manifold, rather it is certain and direction is pre-determined.

Mr. Khan says, Osama-bin-Laden rewrote the theory of motion in his own way. "If you bomb our cities, we will do the same to you". Seemingly anodyne quip, but realistically an unshooked remark. Theory of motion exudes a persistent reality that after being applied, force must turn back to the origin with same velocity. But what Osama-bin-Laden externalises is a sheer vendetta, which can never ever be justified or accepted by any rational order.

Morality is not a science. It is an

edified layer of mind that compels human beings to keep aloof from absurdity, violence, terrorism or wildness. Unfortunately, Mr. Khan has clothed morality with a materialistic observation and equalised both morality and morality of violence in the same line. It is very offensive, imprudent and egregious.

Sulav Chowdhury
London, England

St. Martin's Island: Next in the line of fire

Tullow Oil plc and its joint venture partners were awarded licence for oil and gas exploration in 1997 for Blocks 17 & 18 covering an area of over 18,367 sq. km. These blocks lie in the south-eastern off-shore areas of Bangladesh that support the vulnerable fish spawning areas of the Bay of Bengal, and areas that lie in the vicinity of areas declared as Ecologically Critical Areas (ECA) in 1999 by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) under the Bangladesh

Environment Conservation Act 1995. Three of the ECAs lie in the proximity of these blocks, viz., Sonadia Island, Cox's Bazaar to Teknaf sea beach and St. Martin's Island. Further St. Martin's Island is also declared as a Marine Park by the GOB with all its entity and functions that support such a unique ecosystem.

Recently, Tullow Bangladesh Ltd. is planning to conduct seismic survey and exploration drilling at St. Martin's Island. It is high time that Bangladeshis should raise their voices against any attempts that carry potential threats to the destruction of the natural heritages of the country. The marine life/ecosystem around St. Martin's Island is a unique ecosystem in its physical and geological composition. The coral-like reef ecosystem is very different from any of the other coral ecosystems found around the globe. Further, the island provides nesting beaches for four of the globally endangered sea turtle

species viz., Leatherback, Hawksbill, Green turtle and Olive Ridley. As per the country's laws the oil and gas exploration licence should automatically be treated as null and void since the declaration of some areas under Blocks 17 & 18 are declared as protected.

St. Martin's Island is our national pride, a jewel of the northern Bay of Bengal and no activities of potential hazard, like gas exploration, should be allowed to destroy or disturb the sanctity and sanctuary of marine bio-diversity. This is a national issue and there should be a public debate on such issues of national interest.

Dr. S. M. A. Rashid
On e-mail

'Indian visas'

A letter by Mr. Biswajest in this column needs some honest elaboration. The writer must be thanked for the fact that he at least reads a Bangladeshi paper.

Because as most of the Ameri-

cans do not know what is "rest of the world", similarly most of the Indians do not bother for their "neighbours" other than Pakistan with its reply of five bombs against four of Indians. We Bangladeshis genuinely appreciate Indian concerns like security, transit-fencing etc. of course from Indian perspective, as they do not recognise "rest of the neighbours"

How many Indians know that BSF kills 400 innocent Bangladeshis yearly, Bangladesh is India's largest market while not allowing Bangladeshi goods, one and half lakh Indians work in Bangladesh, skilled Indians from Gulf and Singapore are pouring daily into Bangladeshi industries?

Transit between Bangladesh and Nepal was permitted by India before six years to be stopped after four lorries crossed. About transit Bangladeshi roads are already congested heavily with traffic. Lot

more can be cited. But from India we want that all our goods are allowed to be traded to India as thousands of Indian goods are traded in Bangladesh. If our goods cannot compete with local Indian goods that is to be seen. I believe that only by allowing Bangladeshi goods into Indian market the economy of this Indian neighbour can take an unprecedented boom equivalent to Far Eastern countries. Finally Indians should not see Bangladesh as bottomless basket of 1972. Indian public and policy makers must take note of great economic progress their poor neighbour has made. What one and half lakh skilled Indians working in Bangladesh understand millions of Indians fail to perceive it. Indian psyche will hardly change. It has already pushed us to look East.

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