

## Iraq tragedy

*We condole the deaths*

WE are shocked at the death of almost a thousand Iraqi citizens in one of the most tragic, unfortunate and horrifying accidents that have taken place in Baghdad in recent times. This practically meant the single biggest loss of Iraqi life since the US-led invasion in 2003. Around a million Shias had converged on their way to Kadhimiya shrine to mark the martyrdom of the 8th century religious figure Imam Musa al-Kadhim. But reports of a mortar attack that killed several people triggered widespread chaos among those on a bridge on the river Tigris. The intensity of panic only exacerbated when rumours of possible suicide bombers spread like wild fire among the pilgrims. When the iron railings of the bride gave way, many jumped into the river and drowned, many were crushed, mostly women and children.

The images of hospital corridors lined with bodies, as well as on the pavements outside, grief-stricken relatives lifting the covers looking for their loved ones, grieving relatives mourning over the dead bodies -- will all haunt not just the Iraqis, but the world too for quite some time to come.

We express our deepest sympathies to the bereaved families and those who were crippled in the stampede to be barely existing on the margins of life.

This tragic incident is, however, symptomatic of the political volatility in Iraq. It is also indicative of the vulnerable psyche of the ordinary Iraqi citizens, who have almost regularly seen eruptions of violence, in one form or another, with a deep sense of insecurity becoming almost a mental fixation with them. In fact, it wasn't surprising to see them react in such a nervous way since there have been attacks on religious gatherings in the past. The gnawing fear that they have been living in only found expression on Wednesday.

Now, our immediate hope is that the incident will not fuel any violence in the country and that adequate surveillance and precautionary measures will precede the staging of any future religious convergence.

## We can't believe it happened!

*Has sense of proportion taken leave?*

THIS was an act of impropriety, plain and simple. It cannot be dismissed as anything else because of the potential it reflects of tearing apart the fabric of mutual respect that binds institutions into a healthy working order.

The arrival at the High Court premises of some Special Branch officials and their insistence on meeting Justice Khairul Huq, one of the two judges who declared the 5th amendment to the Constitution illegal, in the midst of a hearing they were holding, would have been an outrage by itself. What is even worse was that they pressed for having a word with Justice Huq in spite of attempts at dissuasion, and in fact had their way as the judge came down from the bench to move to his retiring room for a short while and talk.

The sequence of indiscretions ran like this: first, the SB men announce their presence in the court; secondly, they virtually seek the precedence of their errands over the court in session; and obviously it escapes them that, all of this being set against the backdrop of the HC verdict on fifth amendment, could be deemed to be intimidating.

If they had anything to say, it could be conveyed to persons concerned through other methods, especially when they were ostensibly offering security to them presumably in consequence of a decision at a higher level of the government. Why those people had to upset the proceedings of a court even for a short while when the message they spelt out could be communicated to the Registrar in an unobtrusive manner?

We urge the government to go into the matter and take whatever action would be appropriate in accord with the high place judiciary has in a democracy.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ACCORDING to newspaper reports there is very loud and clear anger at the allegedly widespread bomb blasts of 17th August last and the massive intelligence failure thereto. If that is the considered view and the perceived reality then one will have to admit that this is not the first of its kind as some would like us to believe.

**Failures**  
Facts, admittedly, are disconcerting but then did not the intelligence fail when father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with most of his immediate family members and other near relations were murdered in the most gruesome manner? Similarly, intelligence also failed when state apparatus could not prevent the tragic assassination of President Ziaur Rahman, the liberation war hero.

Nearer home intelligence services could not prevent the sad deaths of former prime ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. The smart Brits and the overbearing Americans could not forestall the 7/7 or the now infamous 9/11. The discerning observer may find it interesting to venture further past into the last stages of the second world war when the failure of German intelligence facilitated the successful Normandy landings of the allied forces and the great Field Marshal Erwin Rommel proceeding on leave found himself in a very uncomfortable corner reaching home to join his dear wife on her birthday after buying a pair of fancy Italian shoes for Paris.

**Organisational climate**  
The catalogue of intelligence failures could be stretched further for academic discourses around a roundtable for analytical study but not much would be achieved if we as a nation refuse to go by the norms and rules of a democratic

polity. This is obvious because a disease can not be treated by denying its very existence. We had the unfortunate experience of witnessing a very sensitive intelligence organisation working principally for the whims and caprices of a virtual dictator and using public funds for creating and destabilising political parties, political horse-trading and shadowing people on personal and flimsy grounds. No wonder in such a scenario the professional efficiency is sacrificed and public servants turn into personal servants with the attendant ignominy.

The mission and strategy of our

maintain file and shadow the leaders and workers of pronouncedly constitutional politics-oriented parties belonging to the opposition who are recognised partners in the business of politics. At some point of time when such opposition party comes to power, there is an uneasy relationship between the political masters and the agencies. In such a scenario, professionalism becomes the worst casualty, sense of direction is lost, the organisation dips into a lackadaisical environment and interests of the state take a back seat giving greater space to parti-

In Bangladesh today, we are passing through a sad time when doubts are being expressed publicly about the efficacy and honesty of some vital organs of the state whose functions can neither be arrogated to others nor be privatised. The compounding tragedy is that such criticisms by leaders of our society can not be summarily dismissed. It would not be prudent to treat a disease by denying its very existence. At the same time we cannot give in to the cynics by agreeing to endure what can not be cured. We can definitely overcome the impasse by dint of political

opponent is a sad socio-political reality of our society and in rooting out this menace the police is at best a marginal player. Similarly, the so-called extermination campaign of class enemy by apparently ideologically motivated elements can not be effectively controlled by adopting a purely conventional law and order approach. Extremism of the so-called fundamentalist variety can be countered by a joint strategy of persuasion and tough action, with political direction being conspicuously pronounced. In all these matters, the acumen needed is political sagacity and patience to fight the painfully long battle

political life. It needs to be seen whether some institutions are promoting violence as a means to achieve partisan political objectives and what actions could be taken to convince young people to abjure violence as a way of life. At the same time the areas affected by extremists/fundamentalist activities must come under special surveillance to nab the incorrigible hardcore elements. The government's authority must be conspicuous in such places.

The menacing reality of physical annihilation of political opponent is a phenomenon of comparatively recent origin. What is needed is strong political will resulting into demonstrable actions. The de-criminalisation of the political process will surely prove to be a challenge of an uphill task. In this task there is no alternative to success because we have committed ourselves to a democratic way of life and undoubtedly no democrat can allow the aberration of violence to interpose between the nation and the polity.

We have to decide if violent deaths from grenade attack and bomb blast should be allowed to continue as a pathetic recurrent reality on the national scene as is the situation now. Civility demands that all instances of such deaths be treated apolitically and efforts made to de-link violence from the mainstream politics. The language of reason must take precedence over the language of weapon to prevent us from sliding into an ungovernable scenario. We have to catch the not-so-invisible enemy by the forelock because the follies of democrats will undoubtedly solidify obscurantism of the worst type.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is former Inspector General of Police and Secretary to the Government.

**We have to decide if violent deaths from grenade attack and bomb blast should be allowed to continue as a pathetic recurrent reality on the national scene as is the situation now. Civility demands that all instances of such deaths be treated apolitically and efforts made to de-link violence from the mainstream politics. The language of reason must take precedence over the language of weapon to prevent us from sliding into an ungovernable scenario.**

intelligence organisations had not been stable at least insofar as the domestic threat perception is concerned. It invariably changes with the change of a political government. Differing political agenda often tend to cloud the pragmatic understanding of our real national interests.

**Strategy and direction**  
The broad function of maintaining public order for ensuring internal security is closely associated with the task of collecting and collating intelligence in the interest of the state. In reality, in our situation, the interests of the state often get diluted and mixed up with the interests of the government of the day. The situation is marked by an unfortunate lack of understanding and appreciation of the requirements of the state and the government in a democratic and pluralist society like ours. The unpleasant truth is that intelligence agencies

san considerations. Needless to say that the values of a democratic polity are universal and as such demand unconditional adherence to it.

Intelligence agencies of the region and beyond cooperate for mutually beneficial reasons but the national agency is expected to be able to effectively serve national interests if directed appropriately by the political authority. If they (agency) have to remain preoccupied with largely inconsequential partisan matters to the detriment of national interest, then we will not be able to manage the crisis situation, not to speak of forestalling the tragedies of recent times. We have been criticizing the agencies very loudly without, however, appreciating the impediments to the growth of an apolitical professional organisation. Time has come when we must have the honesty to call a spade a spade and realise that the governments will change hands but not the state.

goodwill and foresight if we admit that the damage caused during the yesteryears have to be repaired and the safety and security of the people will receive unbiased attention. Let us be forewarned that progress in the damage repairing will be slow but if we can muster enough courage to initiate the process and avoid being myopic, our future generations would be the proud citizens of a healthy polity. Our politicians have to take the lead. They have to rise to the occasion.

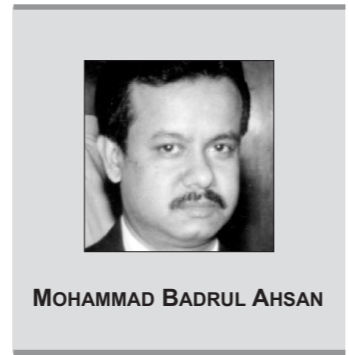
**The perspective**  
While the agencies and the police must unearth and detect the bomb blast cases and prevent such incidents from happening by dint of quality intelligence, they cannot be expected to put a complete stop to such incidents because of circumstances beyond their control. Extreme views advocating and implementing annihilation of the

against extremist depredations and insurgency.

If it is a political battle with armed support and not the other way, we will definitely overcome the present predicament sooner than apprehended. Violence must not be allowed to be a way of our life along with a political consensus to abjure it. The police, admittedly, in this regard has a secondary role to perform and that relates to prevention of some description and intensive investigation once the damage has been done. Let us make sustained efforts to facilitate the police organisation in acquiring the hallmarks of a professionally upright body.

**Political imperatives**  
In striking the core of the problem and offering durable long-term remedies what should engage the serious attention of our leaders is the dispassionate study of the rise of violence and extremism in our

# Identifying with Islam



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

LAST week Michael Graham, a talk show host of the WMAL radio station in the United States, got fired for calling Islam an extremist institution. This was an extreme man taking an extreme view of some extreme people who have taken an extreme view of their religion. But what underlies this extreme situation is a gross misunderstanding. People fighting over politics are calling it religion.

The Palestinians are fighting for a homeland. The Iraqis are fighting against the U.S. occupation. The United States is fighting against terrorism. These are political issues fanned out of religious proportions. There is no holy war. The valiant forces of a new faith are not marching on the old world. Instead, people are fighting for worldly reasons, religion supplementing their rallying cry for political freedom.

The winding road of history has run through turns and twists of religious tensions. There have been deadly battles, destructive wars and ruthless carnage as the mental space of the faithful contended for equal space in the physical world. History is characterised with conflicts between Mamluks and Mongols, between Buddhists and Hindus, Hindus and

Muslims, amongst the Ottomans, Safavids, Uzbeks and Mughals. But the conflict between the Muslims and the Christians goes back a long way, 1300 years.

The first wave came, when the Arabs and the Moors marched west and north ending at Tours in 732. It revived between 11th and 13th centuries when the Crusaders attempted to bring Christian rule to the Holy Land. The Ottoman Turks reversed the balance again in the 14th century, extending sway over the Middle East and the Balkans until the 17th century, capturing

A civilization is political gloss over religious fault lines, and political tolerance fades away quickly in the face of religious excess. The bow of patience has broken even in the cradle of freedom and tolerance. Polls conducted in the US suggest that while 38 per cent Americans hold very negative views about Islam and Muslims, only 2 per cent have anything nice to say about them and over 44 per cent of Americans are willing to deprive Muslims of freedoms and rights available to other Americans.

showdown on 9/11, which led the Westerners to believe that terrorism is rooted in Muslim extremism, and therefore, an attack on terrorism is same thing as an attack on Islam. Although counting by the number of deaths and devastations, the Muslim militancy has not surpassed the havoc of U.S. diplomacy—the assassinations, political upheavals, genocides, starvation and dislocations of life wrought upon nations of the third world in the name of democracy and freedom.

The bad news is that this is

ary actions, because it is a struggle of faith in power at all cost.

Whereas religious crisis is a struggle of power in faith and for the Muslims around the world that struggle is obvious in the Western criticism of Islam. But there is growing discontent even within the Islamic ranks whether time has come for moderation in their leap of faith. "The Islamic Reformation has to begin here, with an acceptance of the concept that all ideas, even sacred ones, must adapt to altered realities", Salman Rushdie wrote in *The Washington*

in even stronger terms.

Sheikh Muhammad al-Mukhtar al-Shanqiti, an Islamic scholar, went on record to distance themselves from those who attack innocents, because one of the rules of conduct of jihad is not to kill women, children, old men and monks in their monasteries. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi looks at this subject from a different angle. In his book *Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism*, he quotes a hadith: "When two Muslims draw weapons against each other, they are at the brink of hell. If one of them kills the other, they both enter it together."

Power and faith. Each has its kingdom, one in politics and another in religion. It is dangerous to fight over politics with religious sentiments and fight over religion with political instincts. To keep them separate, the Christian West underwent reformation in the Middle Ages. The power of church was diminished to transform the relationship between man and God.

A devout man can't be bifurcated in his faith and freedom, because he finds his freedom only in his faith. The Western democracy takes care of freedom, but ignores the faith. On the other hand, religious extremism takes care of faith but ignores freedom. Two weeks ago 500 bomb blasts rocked the country within an hour, and it was shocking to find that devout Muslims might have orchestrated that terror. We don't know what was on their minds. But they are extreme men, hell-bent to bring us the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is difficult to identify them with either faith or freedom, whereas Islam is both.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

**A devout man can't be bifurcated in his faith and freedom, because he finds his freedom only in his faith. The Western democracy takes care of freedom, but ignores the faith. On the other hand, religious extremism takes care of faith but ignores freedom. Two weeks ago 500 bomb blasts rocked the country within an hour, and it was shocking to find that devout Muslims might have orchestrated that terror. We don't know what was on their minds. But they are extreme men, hell-bent to bring us the Kingdom of Heaven. It is difficult to identify them with either faith or freedom, whereas Islam is both.**

Constantinople, and twice laying siege to Vienna. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Ottoman power declined. Britain, France, and Italy established control over most of North Africa and the Middle East.

But if religion created divisions, politics often created unions. Suleyman the Magnificent cooperated with the French against the Habsburgs in the 1530s. When the Portuguese were driven from Hormuz, Abbas I benefited from English co-operation. As imperialists, both the British, in India and Nigeria, and the Russians, in Central Asia, co-operated with some Muslim rulers and interests at the same time as they fought others.

Samuel Huntington writes in *The Clash of Civilizations*, "A person can be half-French and half-Arab and simultaneously even a citizen of two countries. It is more difficult to be half-Catholic and half-Muslim." Young men, who were born and brought up in UK, blew up themselves in London last July to prove his point. Huntington further says that the conflict of civilizations happens at two levels. One is the differences in power; hence struggle at military, economic and institutional level. Another is the differences in culture, that is, basic values and beliefs, between people, nations and other elements.

Islam and the West are clashing at both levels. The cultural tensions escalated to a military

where things are coming to a head. The militant Islam is a concern for the West, and the West is hurting the Muslims shoving its version of democracy down their throat. Democracy is a political solution for secular minds. It can't work in an environment heavily charged with religious sentiments.

The West created that environment when it pushed a fairly political crisis into religious contention. If a bunch of Muslim men went down with the Twin Towers it wasn't fault of Islam as much as the Mai Lai massacre or the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki weren't fault of Christianity. Political crisis, rightly or wrongly, often culminate in mili-

Post on 07 August 2005. Arguing that the Koran was revealed at a time of great change in the Arab world, he asked, "Why would the Messenger's personal circumstances have anything to do with the Message?"

Many Muslims are not comfortable with suicide bombings. When a young mother of two blew herself up at the Israeli checkpoint, Dr. Hasan May al-Nurani, a prominent Palestinian who was also a candidate for president of the Palestinian Authority, demanded an apology from Hamas because the true place for jihad for that woman was to raise her two children, one of whom still needed her milk. Ziyad Abu al-Hija, a Palestinian intellectual, decried it

## OPINION

# Combating religious militancy

BRIGADIER GENERAL SHAMSUDDIN AHMED (RETD.)

THE synchronized bomb blasts that the country witnessed in as many as its 63 district towns including the capital city Dhaka on 17 August close on the heels of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's departure that day for Beijing on a state visit are too serious a matter to be taken lightly. The perpetrators of these heinous acts of terrorism which killed 2 and seriously injured about 300 innocent people struck as they chose taking full advantage of the relative laxity of the state security agencies which are usually prone to lowering their guards once the Prime Minister is away. Had the bombs been powerful and lethal, these would have played havoc with our life and property on a scale unimaginable. But as it appears the intention of the terrorists was not to cause widespread death and destruction. All they wanted was to demonstrate to the people here and the western world that they are a potentially powerful group capable of taking on whoever they wish to in their bid to negate all that independence, freedom and democracy stand for

and implement their own agenda of actions.

Leaflets of Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh found at various sites of explosion apart, if we dispassionately consider the series of bomb blasts which have occurred and the various institutions and groups of people targeted by these blasts over the last six years the picture that emerges slowly and gradually is that of a hydra headed monster of religious militancy trying to run a parallel government. It will be interesting to note that whether it is the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, the coalition partner of the alliance government which minces no words to decry publicly the system of governance in place in the country as satanic and vows to establish what it calls the rule of the Quranic law or it is the banned Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh or such radical militant Islamic outfits avowedly engaged in professing hate, sectarianism and violence in the name of establishing so-called pristine Islamic rule in the country, **Osama bin Laden** and **Mollah Omar** apparently remain their common idols and role models. They all converge on one point and subscribe to the same shibboleth: "We all shall become Talebans.

**The image of the country as a moderate Muslim state has suffered enormous damage because of the foolhardy and dastardly acts of bomb blasting by a handful of religious zealots over the last few years. An all out war against these so called terrorists need to be mounted. People responsible for planning and carrying out these terrorist acts must be found out and punished ruthlessly no matter who and how powerful they are.**

Bangla (Bangladesh) will become Afghanistan."

It will be interesting again to note that whenever Islamic militancy has been focused upon in the print and electronic media, it is Moulana Matiur Rahman Nizami, the Jamaat Chief and Industries Minister who invariably took upon himself the duty to deny its existence. Is it not somewhat bizarre that when not in the very distant past Prime Minister Khaleda Zia had herself ordered the arrest of notorious Bangla Bhai for his sordid acts of barbarism, killing, abduction, repression etc., all in the name of Islam, in the northern region of the country with the apparent connivance of the local police and some ruling party leaders, it was Moulana Matiur Rahman Nizami who issued a statement saying that there was no such man as Bangla Bhai? Was it not virtually

a denial of the Prime Minister who had earlier ordered the police to arrest Bangla Bhai? Are we to believe that it is Mr. Nizami and not the Prime Minister who is calling the shots? Was it at all necessary for the Jamaat Chief to come out openly to defend Bangla Bhai like this if it was not as if he were defending himself and his creation?

And only recently following the 17 August bomb blasts it was Matiur Rahman Nizami who again took upon himself the duty to clarify the haze surrounding the incident and made the most preposterous remarks accusing Indian and Israeli intelligence agencies of having caused these blasts. One may as well ask Mr. Nizami to divulge his source of information and intelligence on this matter. Moulana Matiur Rahman Nizami is neither the Home Minister nor the Defence

Minister of Bangladesh to be credited with access to intelligence on such a vital and delicate issue. Mr. Nizami's stance against India is well known from the days of our Liberation War. His crass accusation against India at a time when we do not have the best of relations with India and most importantly when SAARC summit is around the corner is the least expected from him. The question that naturally comes up in the mind is: will it not affect the ensuing SAARC summit which has been postponed more than once?

Foreign Minister Morshed Khan too was no better than Mr. Nizami when he described the bomb blasts as merely "acts of a few hoodlums". No, those who masterminded and carried out the bomb blasts of the magnitude and scale of the 17th August are terrorists and not hoodlums. There is a difference between

terrorists and hoodlums. After all who are we befooling but ourselves by trying to play down such horrendous acts of terrorism and pass the buck to others while we know in the heart of our hearts that the cancerous growth is there in our body?

What is at stake is not merely whether it is the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) or the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) winning or losing the next election. Our national political leaders must look beyond and farther than that. It is the existence of secular, progressive and democratic Bangladesh -- which we all dream of as we broke away from Pakistan in 1971 -- which is at stake. The terrorists in the garb of so called Islamic fundamentalists and extremists are on the march to create anarchy and destabilise the country in order to convince the people that our politicians have

failed the country and the people, that Bangladesh is a failed state and that it has been folly fighting the liberation war and creating the independent state in 1971. Once they succeed in winning support of the people, they will then usher in a Taliban type of government and turn this country into a veritable Afghanistan, and all in the name of Islam!

The fact that ours is a Muslim majority country and that majority of our people are poor and illiterate makes the country vulnerable to religious bigotry. But there is a glimmer of hope in that we do have a large sprinkling of educated men and women, an ever expanding enlightened civil society and history and tradition of religious tolerance, secular culture and democratic aspirations which are likely to help the people in their struggle against the forces of religious bigotry and anachronism. In all probability, the push for Talibanisation will not succeed. But nevertheless the Islamisation process which began after the 1975 tragedy will probably continue to flourish if the two main political parties -- AL and BNP -- do not come to terms with the reality and forge unity against the anti-liberation and defeated politico-religious forces of 1971. The possi-

bility of a protracted civil war and colossal blood shed looms large on the horizon.

It is, however, hearing to know that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has for the first time taken the state minister for home affairs to task for the 17 August bomb blasts and the serious security lapses. The situation calls for a shake up of the cabinet and a firm stand against religious bigotry and militancy. The image of the country as a moderate Muslim state has suffered enormous damage because of a foolhardy and dastardly acts of bomb blasting by a handful of religious zealots over the last few years. An all out war against these so called terrorists need to be mounted. People responsible for planning and carrying out these terrorist acts must be found out and punished ruthlessly no matter who and how powerful they are. The nation is pinning its hope on the Prime Minister. Will she rise to the occasion and lead the nation out of the crisis?

The writer is a freedom fighter and former Military Secretary to the President of Bangladesh