

The mystery of the letter to Dr. Rice

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

I was intrigued by the US lawmakers' letter to the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, published in the front page of The Daily Star on September 15, recommending that President Bush raise the issue of political violence in Bangladesh at the United Nations World Summit. (President Bush did not raise it.) First of all, I wanted to congratulate The Daily Star on the scoop, because I could not find the statement printed anywhere in the US press.

Then I tried to contact the various US Senators and Congressmen for a copy of the letter they were signatories to. Then an extraordinary picture began to emerge. Except for Senators Barack Obama (Illinois) and Senator Barbara Boxer (California), seven of the nine Senators listed were either from Massachusetts (Edward Kennedy and John Kerry) or the New England states bordering Massachusetts: Senator Lincoln Chafee and Senator Jack Reed are from Rhode Island, Senator Patrick Leahy is from Vermont, Senator Olympia Snowe is from Maine, and Senator John Sununu is from New Hampshire.

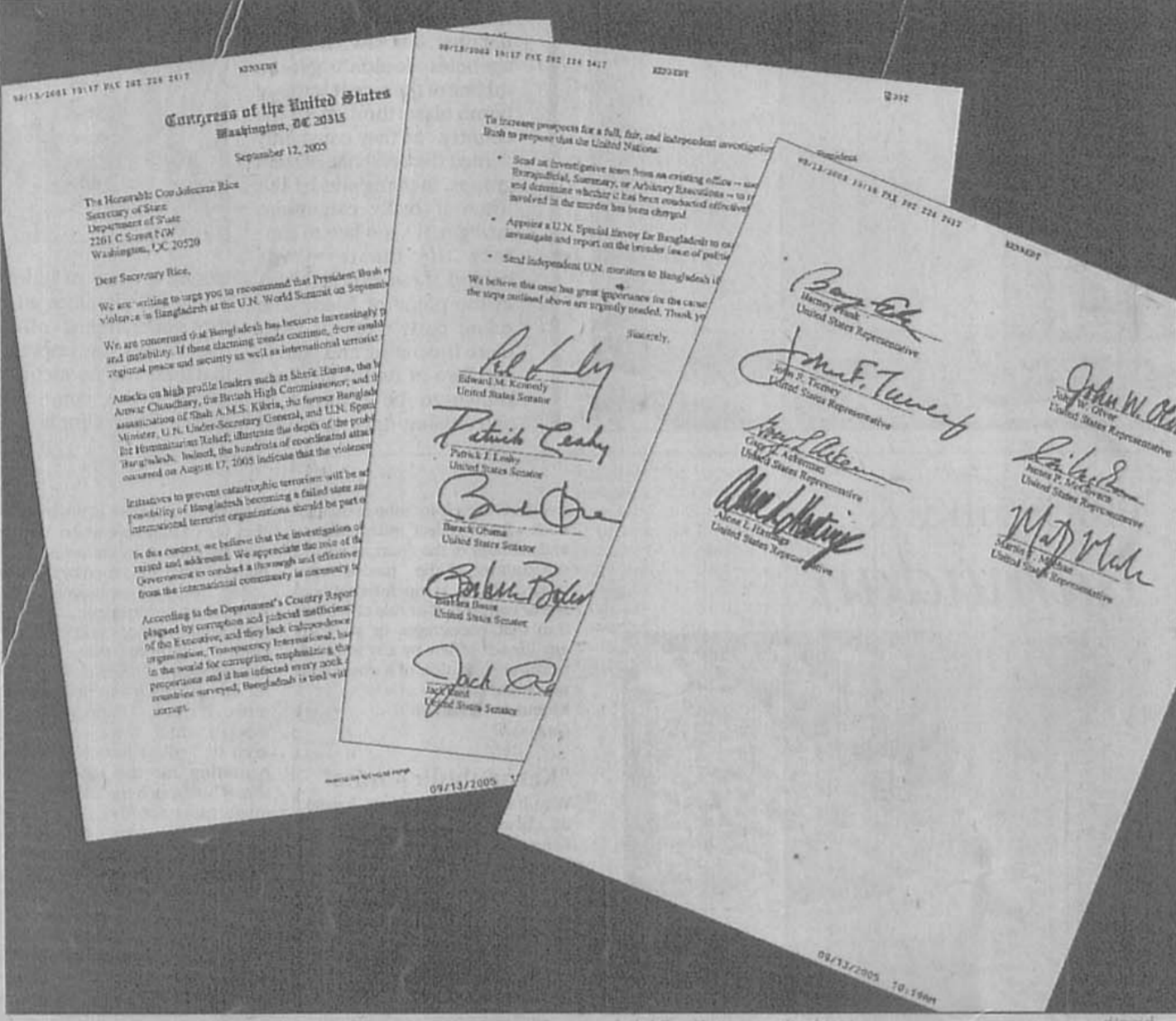
The Congressmen named are also predominantly from Massachusetts. Except for Congressman Gary Ackerman (New York) and Alcee Hastings (Florida), five of the seven Congressmen listed -- Barney Frank, John Olver, John Tierney, James McGovern and Martin Meehan -- are from Massachusetts! The conclusion is bizarre: only the Massachusetts area (Boston is the largest city and the state capital of Massachusetts) Senators and Congressmen are selectively outraged by what is happening in Bangladesh, and the Senators and Congressmen from the rest of America are not! The only other possibility is more disturbing: someone or some groups from the Boston area are orchestrating an anti-Bangladeshi smear campaign. I know from personal experience that to secure a constituent's vote, Senators and Congressmen from one's own state are too eager to oblige the constituent, if the request is of a minor nature and of little political significance. Such services to the constituents are routine.

It is inconceivable that Senators from the calibre of Ted Kennedy (who was a staunch supporter of Bangladesh during our war of liberation), John Kerry, and Barbara Boxer, and Congressmen of the stature of Barney Frank, John Tierney, and Gary Ackerman would ask President Bush to implement initiatives to prevent "catastrophic terrorism" in Bangladesh. By now it is clear that only those who stand to gain by Bangladesh becoming a "failed state" promote and perpetuate the myth that Bangladesh is well on its way towards national suicide. I do not believe for a moment that these stalwart legislators, all well-known friends of Bangladesh, would knowingly succumb to such malicious propaganda.

As in neighbouring countries, indeed many parts of the world, political and religious violence are facts of life in Bangladesh. For the sake of Bangladesh and not to please Bangladesh's detractors, the government must tackle and defeat religious and political violence, starting with the extremist elements within the ruling party itself. There is no question of negotiations with the terrorists. Terrorists like Bangla Bhai must be hunted down and brought to justice. However, to suggest, as the

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Talking about the UN, let us not forget that the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq without the backing of the UN Security Council. It is amusing, then, for the legislators to now ask the UN to run errands for them in Bangladesh. Starting with the US Supreme Court, most judges in the US are strictly political appointees. At a time of political bickering over senatorial hearings to confirm President Bush's nominee for the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, John Roberts, it is comical for the US legislators to comment, "The lower courts (in Bangladesh) are under the authority of the executive and they lack independence."



The letter written by 16 US senators and representatives to the Secretary of State.

letter does, "if these alarming trends continue, there could be serious consequences for regional peace and security as well as international terrorist activity in the region" is a stretch. American newspapers are full of reports of terrorism in the Indian states, such as Assam, that border Bangladesh. Yet, the US legislators do not seem to be worried about terrorism there. Have any of these US legislators condemned Narendra Modi's Gujarat-state sponsored terrorism that was responsible for the massacre of thousands of Muslims in India in February 2002? I wonder why not.

It is disgraceful that the terrorists who assassinated the former Bangladesh Finance Minister SAMS Kibria earlier this year have not yet been brought to justice. I have not met a single Bangladeshi who is not appalled and angry at the assassination of Mr. Kibria, a brilliant intellectual who was not even a career politician. Every day the perpetrators of Mr. Kibria's murder go unpunished, is a shameful day for Bangladesh. Bangladeshi government should and must do better to administer justice

and soothe the raw wounds of the bereaved families. As The Daily Star columnist Brig. Gen. Shahedul Anam Khan pointed out in his September 22 column, why are the US legislators so obsessed with Mr. Kibria's murder only? Why not ask for justice for all victims of political and religious violence in Bangladesh and elsewhere? No one aggrieved family's grief is superior to another's. And it is imperative upon the aggrieved family members not to take out their frustration over government inaction by attempting to destroy the reputation of the whole nation. Our former Prime Minister and the current leader of the opposition, Shaikh Hasina, was almost assassinated last August. Why have the US legislators not asked about sending "UN special envoy" to the trial of Shaikh Hasina's would-be killers?

Talking about the UN, let us not forget that the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq without the backing of the UN Security Council. It is amusing, then, for the legislators to now ask the UN to run errands for them in Bangladesh. Starting with the US Supreme Court, most judges in the US are strictly political appointees. At a time of political bickering over senatorial hearings to confirm President Bush's nominee for the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, John Roberts, it is comical for the US legislators to comment, "The lower courts (in Bangladesh) are under the authority of the executive and they lack independence." The degree of political independence of the judiciary varies from country to country. And it is fascinating that the US legislators would take such keen interest in the working of Bangladesh's lower courts! Let us recall that in 2000, it was not the American voters, but the US Supreme Court which in a 5 to 4 decision installed George W. Bush as the President of the United States.

Bangladesh and the MDGs

The rich countries pledged at the Millennium Summit in 2000 to pay 0.7 percent of their gross national product as aid to help poor countries achieve the MDGs. The commitment for an additional fund of \$50 billion a year and 0.7 percent of GNP for reduction of poverty by the developed countries can go a long way to achieve MDGs. But the rich nations should be as good as to their commitment.

ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE world's largest summit, attended by more than 170 heads of state and government, was held in New York to thrash out the future of the United Nations, as it marked its 60th anniversary. The three-day World Summit 2005 held from September 14 to 16 also assessed the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are the targets set in the UN-designed development recipe for the developing countries of the world to attain by 2015 by addressing various undeveloped sectors, such as poverty, education, health, nutrition, infant mortality, and environment. The leaders from 191 member countries of the United Nations assembled in the General Assembly session in September 2000 and pledged to halve hunger and poverty, enroll children in primary schools, reduce child and maternal mortality, foil the spread of infectious diseases and ensure environmental sustainability.

A recent review on MDG progress, prepared jointly by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific, the UN Development Program, and the Asian Development Bank revealed that no developing country in the Asia-Pacific region is on track to achieve all the goals by 2015. Regarding the 'dramatic progress' in reducing poverty within the region, the report said the number of people who suffer from hunger has fallen only slightly. It said some 48 percent of children in Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh suffered from malnutrition, while the number in India was 47 percent. "Asia is the home to 71 percent of the total number of people in the world without access to improved sanitation; 58 percent of those without access to safe water, 56 percent of the world's undernourished; 54 percent of those living in slums; and accounts for 43 percent of the world's child mortality," the report said.

shows that the incidence of poverty by head count ratio on the basis of Food Energy Intake was 42.1 percent in 2004 (44.7 percent in 1999). The poverty rate declined 2.6 percent in the last five years, which amounted to an annual poverty reduction rate of about 0.52 percent. The Citizen's Global Progress Report on Poverty Eradication and Gender Equity ranked Bangladesh as the fifth worst among 125 countries in attaining the MDGs. It placed Bangladesh only next to Ethiopia, Rwanda, Niger, and Madagascar, the four worst countries.

The Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia addressed a high-level Plenary Summit on MDGs on September 14 and the 60th session of the UN General Assembly on September 17. In her speeches, Begum Zia highlighted Bangladesh's success in reaching the MDGs by 2015 as the country has already attained two out of the eight MDGs by reducing the gender gap in education and enhancing access to safe drinking water. The Bangladesh Prime Minister sought international support for the developing countries including Bangladesh to achieve the MDGs. Begum Zia also attended a seminar on poverty alleviation sponsored by the Clinton Initiative in New York on September 15.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) arranged a dialogue on 'Attaining MDG Targets in Bangladesh: Progress and the Remaining Challenges' a few months back. The experts from home and abroad said in the dialogue that Bangladesh would have to work hard to achieve the MDGs in 2015. The speakers mentioned that the progress of Bangladesh to achieve the MDGs is less than satisfactory in income poverty, adult literacy, rate of immunisation, and maternal mortality. The speakers also indicated that Bangladesh faces 26 challenges to achieve the MDGs in 2015. These included addressing income poverty, reaching the poor, protecting the vulnerable, reducing hunger and malnutrition, ensuring quality education, designing and implementing effective policies, protecting women against discrimination and domestic violence, and reducing child deaths from accidents.

The eight targets set for Bangladesh under the MDGs to be reached by 2015 are as follows: (1) To reduce extreme poverty from 28 percent to 14 percent. (2) To increase enrolment rate of children in the primary schools from 73.7 percent to 100 percent and reduce primary school dropout rates from 38 percent to zero percent. (3) To elimination gender disparity in primary and secondary education and acquire equal female to male ratio in primary schools by 2005 and all levels of education by 2015. (4) To reduce under-five infant mortality from 151 deaths per thousand to 94 per thousand and enhance proportion of immunised one-year olds for measles from 53 percent to 100 percent. (5) To reduce maternal mortality from 574 deaths per 100,000 to 143 and increase the proportion of births attended by skilled mid-wives to 50 percent by 2010. To reduce total fertility rate 2.2 percent by 2010 and maternal malnutrition to less than 20 percent also included in the target. (6) To combat infectious diseases like malaria and foil the spread of HIV/Aids. (7) To increase

the vulnerable, reducing hunger and malnutrition, ensuring quality education, designing and implementing effective policies, protecting women against discrimination and domestic violence, and reducing child deaths from accidents. The speakers also indicated that Bangladesh faces 26 challenges to achieve the MDGs in 2015. These included addressing income poverty, reaching the poor, protecting the vulnerable, reducing hunger and malnutrition, ensuring quality education, designing and implementing effective policies, protecting women against discrimination and domestic violence, and reducing child deaths from accidents.

The much vaunted MDGs took a back seat as the lingering shadow of terrorism became the dominant theme of the UN World Summit 2005. However, the summit agreed to channel additional fund of \$50 billion a year by 2010 for fighting poverty as world leaders expressed their commitment to achieve the MDGs by the terminal year 2015. UN Under Secretary General for Communication and Public Information Shashi Tharoor disclosed the commitment for augmented funds during a tell conference with media. The rich countries pledged at the Millennium Summit in 2000 to pay 0.7 percent of their gross national product as aid to help poor countries achieve the MDGs. The commitment for an additional fund of \$50 billion a year and 0.7 percent of GNP for reduction of poverty by the developed countries can go a long way to achieve MDGs. But the rich nations should be as good as to their commitment.

Recent Preliminary Report of the Poverty Monitoring Survey 2004 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

The hand-gun menace

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

RECENT events in Bangladesh have brought into sharp focus, not only the question of human insecurity prevailing within the country, but also the pernicious effect of illegal small arms in urban as well as rural areas. Every day, media reports highlight the use of such weapons and the unfortunate consequences that result from such action. The lack of governance and the criminalisation of politics, in their own ways, have contributed to this situation.

The study deals with illegal small arms and violence in Bangladesh with particular focus on human security issues. The author has also acknowledged the assistance and cooperation he has received in this regard from the Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, and the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo.

The publication has tried to focus on community security and also identify the causes that encourage increased use of illegal arms within the country. In this context, it has not only attempted to identify sources of supply, origin, and type of illegal small arms in use, but also the profile and age distribution of the users. Another objective of the study was to assess the involvement of children in gun violence and also identify the nexus between various

Book Review

Illegal Small Arms and Human Insecurity in Bangladesh by Sharif A Kafi

Bangladesh Development Partnership Centre, Dhaka (2005) Pps. 159, Tk 200.00.

crimes and the use of illegal weapons. Methods used for the study included participatory appraisal, use of questionnaires, key informant interviews, scanning of media reports, and small group discussions. I must admit that this multiple approach has provided the reader with significant facts. The publication is interesting. It has identified several factors associated with the widespread circulation and use of small arms. They open windows of thought. The factors include elements like power and status, solvency, protection from the legal system, easy way out from unemployment, desire for revenge, and fear of being harmed in case of refusal to participate in

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armed/criminal activities. The author has also carefully enumerated the link between arms proliferation and politics in Bangladesh. The readings are disturbing. It was unsettling to know that crime groups under the shelter of mainstream political parties and their youth and student wings constitute the largest user group of illegal small arms. This conclusion has also been reaffirmed in the recent past from reports that Islamic fundamentalist groups, left-wing political groups and groups opposed to the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace agreement have been using illegal arms to further their causes. The book underlines another worrying phenomenon. It reveals that the small arms market is

expanding in the country and that crime groups are willing to make higher investments for the guns of their choice. This only proves that gun running has already grown as a strong, organised, and syndicated criminal activity within Bangladesh. Cross border smuggling, liaison, with cross border insurgent groups, locally made guns, and misuse of licensed guns have further exacerbated the equation.

The book also points out the relationship existing between guns and children. It states that while a few non-state armed groups use children under eighteen as combatants, it has been found in Bangladesh that left-wing groups use a good number of ninth-grade, tenth-grade and eleventh-grade students and other juveniles of similar age as frontline armed cadres. It has been suggested that in all probability, poverty has a bearing on this relationship.

The study assumes value not only because it identifies local root causes but also for its commendatory measures on how to tackle this multi-dimensional problem. I also take this opportunity to congratulate the team involved in its research. One can only hope that the responsible authorities in Bangladesh will seriously consider the various aspects delineated in the book. They need to do so and that too urgently.

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The real jihad

SYED JAWAD QUADER

"I QRA bismeh Rabbi kallazi khalak." These words are the first revelation of Allah's message to Muhammad (pbuh) and mankind. They mean, "Read, in the name of thy Lord." It is ironic that many Muslims do not attach much significance to these first few words of the Quran. Islam, as preached by Muhammad, is a deep, insightful, philosophical and intelligent religion, which harps on peace (meaning of the word "Islam") and tolerance.

We are now sadly witnessing a quarter of Muslims digressing from this original Islam. Divisions between Shiites and Sunnis, are at an all-time high. Many feel that Muslims are not subject to equal treatment globally because of the notion that they have failed to cope with the pace of the modern world. Many revere Osama bin Laden as their leader, and believe that his "jihad" will wrestle the "tyranny" faced by Muslims all over the world. Jihad is a war against the enemies of Islam, not against mankind. It is a war. A war is not only random killing and violence. War is a very keen mind game which requires intelligent decision-making based on knowledge, understanding of the war platform, tactics and the proper

The "Osama version" of jihad is an illusory shortcut to bringing resistance to the poor lifestyle Muslims face now. It is a jihad for people who are intellectually and educationally starved, and are incapable of going through the hard work to bring themselves up to the standard intellectually. The reality is that this is the world of intellectual competition, where only the best survive

applications of force. "The West" -- who is seen as the "enemy camp" by Osama -- far supersedes the Muslims in force and power. They have means to destroy the whole world in a day. Can the Muslims defeat them with the "Osama version" of jihad? It is precisely this mentality that has driven the Muslims hundreds of years backwards and to this present situation. They are to be blamed for their own downfall. Jihad in the present day context should not include bombs and bullets. It requires brainwork. Modern day jihad should not be fought with guns; it should be fought with pens, where a writing desk is the battle field. The "enemy camp" is intelligent. They have developed a complex social structure made up of components such as commerce, technology, and constructive thinking. The

modern age requires these components undeniably; they have made everyone's life better than 200 years ago. How significantly have the Muslims contributed to this? How many times can we see a prominent Muslim intellect or scholar, or inventor or businessman among those who have contributed into shaping modern history? Only 700 years ago, Muslim intellects made regular breakthrough advances in mathematics, literature, geography, and science. These advances were the building blocks of some of the strongest empires the world has ever seen -- under Muslim leadership. These have faded away. Muslims are now headed by Mullahs and Imams who are below average educationally and intellectually, to say the least. They operate within very watertight mental frameworks of clichéd

rules and superimposed (bedaad) beliefs. One will not be joking if he says that these people are more concerned about the length of their beards than the real principles of Islam. Islam is a civilised religion. It has no place for uncouth and close-minded leaders or subjects. The "Osama version" of jihad is an illusory shortcut to bringing resistance to the poor lifestyle Muslims face now. It is a jihad for people who are intellectually and educationally starved, and are incapable of going through the hard work to bring themselves up to the standard intellectually. The reality is that this is the world of intellectual competition, where only the best survive. Muslims who cannot survive the competition will naturally and rightly be blown away -- that is true for anyone irrespective of their religion. Get ahead in the competition. That is the real jihad that faces Muslims today. A sum-up of the message to all who sympathise with the "Osama version" of jihad is: read the Quran. Drop your guns. Pick your pens and books up and start fighting the real jihad.

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