

Welcome the holy month

Its teachings must be reflected in our lives

THE holy month of Ramadan for the Muslims is here. This is the month for practicing self-restraint for spiritual cleansing. It reminds the Muslims of that unique feature of Islam, the value and importance of leading a life of austerity, kindness and the true meaning of brotherhood. It teaches us humility and to be kind to the less fortunate. Ramadan is also the time for all Muslims for soul-searching and indeed taking a stock of their lives and works over the years.

In today's context Ramadan bears special significance not just for Bangladesh but the entire Muslim world. Bangladesh is passing through one of its most difficult times. Today only a minuscule minority of misguided "Muslims," so called champions and defenders of the faith, are terrorising and killing innocent people. Islam has no place for these kinds of senseless killings that engender instability and create panic in the society. Not only that, it is also seriously damaging our image abroad. Needless to say, time is running out and we must arrest the scourge of religious extremism before it threatens our very existence. Let us, the majority of Muslims, therefore take a pledge in this holy Month of Ramadan to stand up united against all forms of extremism, bigotry and intemperate behaviour.

To this end the nation must unite and work together. The government on its part must play its role with utmost sincerity and total commitment. The administration should also remember that much of the people's co-operation and support would depend on the transparency of its interventions on the ground.

Let us all in this holy month renew our pledge once again to become truly the best creation amongst all beings in the world. Let us recall the life and the examples of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Let us all follow his ideals of living a life of moderation and humility, of total honesty and truthfulness.

What we follow and practice over this one month of Siyam must also be reflected in our words and actions all through the year and through our lives. That is what this month enjoins upon all Muslims.

Countering religious propaganda

The motivation campaign must be kept above party politics

THE government's plan to launch a motivation campaign as a counterweight to the Islamic militants' strategy of indoctrinating innocent and unsuspecting youths-- and using them for carrying out all sorts of subversive activities -- is no doubt a move in the right direction.

The militants are exploiting the religious faith and sentiment of the youths and also the religious education that they are being imparted in madrassahs. And the result is an ideological onslaught on Islam itself by a fringe group of fanatics whose politics is based on violence and bloodshed, which deserves condemnation in unequivocal terms.

Now, the question is what have we been doing all these years to neutralise the fundamentalist activities? Obviously, the matter never received the kind of attention that it ought to have until recently. And the religious extremists got the time to organise themselves and began to execute their evil plans.

True, the ideological challenge has to be met by a similar counter offensive that can lay bare the flaws of what the militants are preaching in the name of Islam. But a word of caution would not be out of place here. First, any motivation campaign sponsored by the government itself might not be able to generate enough enthusiasm among the people because of its all too explicit political undertone. So the campaign has to be neutral in the political sense and party priorities must not be allowed to influence the campaign. Second, the government has to dispel the doubts that had crept into the public mind about its role vis-à-vis religious fanaticism, which was greatly bolstered by the ruling alliance's stand on the issue in the past. The government always tried to establish that no religious extremists existed in this country.

So the motivation campaign has to be designed and conducted in a strictly objective manner. Finally, if the government acknowledges that a "kind of education" is working as the driving force behind creation of zealots and fanatics, it should go deeper into the matter and think in terms of redesigning the education system that is liable to breed religious extremism.

Still undetermined!



STATEMENTS of some persons holding high public offices never cease to amaze us. This time one is at a loss to comprehend the state minister for home affair's comment about the presence of fundamentalists in Bangladesh. It is my understanding that by referring to 'fundamentalists' he is actually alluding to the religious extremists whose primary strategy is employment of violence in attaining their strategic aim.

The state minister seemed to accord very little credit to the public's intellect when he said the other day in Chittagong to the press that the government is yet to determine definitively whether there are religious extremists in Bangladesh. People have more between their ears, than what the state minister credits them with, to see the opacity of his remarks. His remarks take an even more poignant character when considered against the backdrop of 17th Aug and all that have gone on since, and of the very recent 3rd Oct bombings.

When the police have filed the first charge-sheet in one of the 17th Aug serial blasts, reportedly defying pressures from a few in the ruling alliance, in which the accused masterminds have been shown as belonging to the proscribed radical Islamist elements, the minister is still unsure of the presence of religious extremists in the country!

The minister's remarks is dem-

onstrative of the government's make-believe world that it chose to live in all this time when it came to the question of religious extremism in Bangladesh. It is hard to believe that the government, according to the State Minister, had actually believed that there were no radical fundamentalists in the country before the 17th Aug bombings. It is even harder to accept the argument that the government is still not convinced that there indeed are Islamic extremists in Bangladesh! If that were so, it would not be out of place to ask what was the major motivation of the administration to ban the two Islamist groups early this year?

We hope that the 17th Aug and 3rd Oct blasts will more than convince the state minister and those that are still vacillating in their minds that these are the handiworks of religious extremists, and they did certainly not suddenly sprout overnight in Bangladesh. The government will do well to stop wasting time trying to determine whether religious extremists are present in the country or not and concentrate in tackling them in a forthright manner.

Such obscure remarks do very little to justify government's action or inaction, but even worse, it confuses the law enforcing agen-

the nation with security by employing the necessary counter-measures against these elements.

With the many arrests made so far after the 17th of Aug, the leaflets that were found at the places of occurrence declaring their ideology, one wonders what more does the government need to be convinced of the fact, however unpleasant that might be to swallow.

And this is what distresses us. If the government did not choose to accept the presence of extremists in the country it is entirely its folly. Over the last many years that include the tenure of the previous government also, there were more than telltale signs of the activities of these groups in Bangladesh. Since 1999, except perhaps for one or two targets, the character of all the other targets chosen by the

perpetrators point to the very political and ideological moorings of these groups. Many of those arrested in the aftermath of the blasts have also admitted to their association with the two banned Islamist groups. And it is very apparent that they carried out their tasks with the motivation and zeal beehooing the radicals only even more so after the 3rd Oct blasts. If the State Minister chooses to

ing activities all over the country. Fifthly, they are capable of being more violent if they choose to be so, as apparent from the casualty from only three blasts as compared to that of the almost five hundred blasts of Aug 17th.

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gious extremists, and they did certainly not suddenly sprout overnight in Bangladesh. The government will do well to stop wasting time trying to determine whether religious extremists are present in the country or not and concentrate in tackling them in a forthright manner.

The law enforcing agencies have done a pretty good job so far in making some important arrests although the brain behind these groups are still at large. Seizure of large quantity of IED materials has perhaps anticipated more destructive activities of the extremists.

The government must therefore further intensify its efforts to apprehend the masterminds. No matter how many low-level operators are apprehended, and we are not sure how many of them there

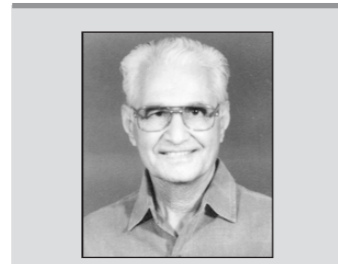
are in the cadres, we cannot suppress their activities unless the brains behind them are nabbed. And there is a need also to look beyond the borders to see the sources of funds as well as motivations. Those arrested recently have made some very startling statements, which must be investigated thoroughly to determine their internal and external patrons, if any.

But equally importantly, the law enforcing agencies must brace up and indeed prepare for bigger and more spectacular fireworks in future by the extremists. This must be done without creating alarm or causing prior panic among the public. It is so much better to be prepared for the worst-case scenario than suffer the consequence of misplaced euphoria. It makes anticipation of the extremists' acts very much easier although one understands that there can never be foolproof arrangements that can anticipate all the eventualities. But to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

A redeeming feature of this is that these elements have little popular support. But their efforts to motivate the gullible must be countered. Ideas must be countered with ideas and the government's plan to launch motivation campaign to counter the religious extremists bears strong rationale. But one must also caution against how this motivation is conducted.

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Power play by and around Iran



M B NAQVI writes from Karachi

them. India voted with the Americans and Europeans. Russia has urged on Iran not to fabricate nuclear weapons, echoing Europeans and Americans. But Russia and China, in a coordinated strategy, have thus sided with the Non-aligned Group. They assert there should be no referral of Iran to the UN Security Council for imposing mandatory sanctions. They have hinted that the proposition will be

porting the US war would jeopardise their vital economic interests.

For Americans, there are the two major considerations: their protégé, Israel, is anxious that military action should take place and the hint that Americans might ask Israel to tackle Iran is also less likely. Israelis too do not relish the idea of starting an open-ended war. Besides, Iran can hit back in America's rear, i.e. Iraq. Iranian influ-

America is also putting pressure on India not to build the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline. Indian premier Manmohan Singh wavered on this in July that showed that India's commitment to the pipeline is not all that firm, though Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyer's stand later firmed up. There is now no ambiguity about India that she will have to work closely with America. Gone is its non-alignment. It is

not too certain. It needs to know which alliance will replace UPA. A new election, incidentally, might be the best course; it will realistically realign Indian politics. Difference between the Congress and the BJP is beginning to shrink on economic and foreign policies. It is to be seen what India will choose now. Secularism has prevented Congress-BJP grand coalition that otherwise may have become natu-

no clear demarcation of lines between the two parties. There are radical liberals among the Democrats while their conservatives are indistinguishable from the Neocons. Similarly, among the Republicans there are both hawks and doves. It would be a mistake to underestimate the power of the American Right. The Democrats have lagged behind the Republicans in recent elections because the Democrats have no distinct policy or programmes.

But American unilateralist drive for world domination needs to be checked in by world opinion, the only likely counter-vailing force. The Americans are no longer popular in Europe, in Latin America, and are even less popular in Asia. But protests against American policies today are less vociferous and intense whereas the situation calls for more vigorous protests. It has to pull itself up.

One aspect of the situation is fortunate. The traditional lure of military response by other possible rivals of American drive for being militarily number one is absent. This is the first time in history that all those who are not enamoured of American hegemony and are themselves notable centres of other kinds of power are determined not to adopt a directly hostile stance. They are also opposed to form military blocks. But they do differ with the US and often politically force it to delay or go slow. There is a common determination by China, Russia and EU not to confront the US but to argue with it and rely on the media to do its work.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

What these developments around Iran portend about American intentions is not obscure. Geopolitical wind direction is clear. America is still unilateralist. It is still going flat out to establish its global hegemony. It still wants regime changes wherever possible in Asia. True, many think that Americans cannot undertake new military ventures after Afghanistan and Iraq. But the thinking of the Neocons in America -- which has so far defined America's objectives -- is inflexible.

vetoed in the UNSC. That would thus leave only military option to the US that even the Europeans oppose along with Russia and China.

Iran is no pushover. Its strategic location and its being Number Two oil producer in the region makes it a momentous issue. Americans have long feuded with Iran. Which is why the US is isolating it. But despite having been mired in Afghanistan and Iraq, possible American military action against Iran cannot be ignored. In this possible war, even the European Three are not with America. They have a stake in Iranian oil. Should there be disruptions in oil supplies, the Europeans and the Japanese would suffer most. Moreover, international oil prices will shoot through the roof. That will hit all economies hard and a recession can result. Iran has therefore to be handled with great care. Europeans have gone as far as they could with America. But sup-

porting the US war would jeopardise their vital economic interests. For Americans, there are the two major considerations: their protégé, Israel, is anxious that military action should take place and the hint that Americans might ask Israel to tackle Iran is also less likely. Israelis too do not relish the idea of starting an open-ended war. Besides, Iran can hit back in America's rear, i.e. Iraq. Iranian influ-

ence in southern Iraq is no secret. Iran can make life very difficult for Occupation Forces. Hitherto Iranians have enabled Americans to act freely. But in a conflict between Iran and US, there will then be no Iranian restraint.

Iranians have been hurt by Indian vote. They are angry. Even if they did not know how India will behave after July 18 agreement with America, they are astounded by this strategic alliance. India had made two unusual agreements with the US: Framework Agreement for Military Cooperation under which India can buy any hardware or dual-use technology. The second promised US civilian nuclear reactors and related materials in violation of NPT and rules and laws of Nuclear Suppliers Group's choice. This is a fully-fledged military alliance between India and America. India expects much from the US, while the latter has undertaken to make India a major global military power.

now firmly in American camp. The prospect of the gas pipeline from Iran may have receded.

In India, political reactions are sharply critical of UPA government. On one side, BJP taunted it for caving in to American pressures. On the other, the Leftist allies of the Congress are clearly angry and want no such deal with America. They might threaten a mass agitation. The Congress government has become wobbly and can fall. True, Indian middle class and Big Business simply love America. An Indo-American alliance is most welcome to them. But the prospect of Left leaving the United Progressive Alliance will unsettle everything in India.

Whether India's Left can force the Manmohan Singh government to break with America is not sure. But if UPA comes asunder, a political crisis and mid-term election look likely. But whether Left will destabilise the UPA government is

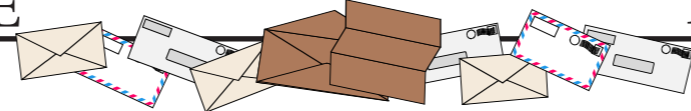
ral. Concern for secularism may yet prevent that.

What these developments around Iran portend about American intentions is not obscure. Geopolitical wind direction is clear. America is still unilateralist. It is still going flat out to establish its global hegemony. It still wants regime changes wherever possible in Asia. True, many think that Americans cannot undertake new military ventures after Afghanistan and Iraq. But the thinking of the Neocons in America -- which has so far defined America's objectives -- is inflexible. Either it is to be given up in toto or it will somehow try and continue the American advance toward becoming the global Hegemon, even if occasionally compelled to temporise.

President Bush is sticking to his original stand. A change might occur if the US Democrats were to define a new foreign policy, with more peaceable goals. But there is

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

Ordeal by innocence

A few days ago I needed some papers to be signed by my teacher to withdraw my scholarship money from the bank. So I went to the department and requested my tutorial madam to sign the papers recommending me. Although I was acquainted with her, as my fellows and I worked with her while we were in her tutorial group, to my utter surprise she asked me whether I supported an Islamic party and said that she wasn't ready to recommend for someone who supported that party. She was looking at me in such a way as if there were bombs in the bag hanging down my shoulder. By the way, like many other devoted Muslims I try to observe and follow every part of Islam and naturally I have been growing a beard and always dress myself like a pious

Muslim does. However, the question shocked me so much that I stood utterly speechless and found nothing to say. After a few seconds I pulled out a bit of smile from inside my motionless body and pasted it onto my shame-stricken trembling lips just to say "Mo madam" My tormented mind was cursing unconsciously those who created such a situation for me and also myself for my own miserable condition which I incurred by going to her rather than any other teacher while she was signing the papers after snatching them from my hand. I was, then, thinking standing apart while my eyes were busy in counting my toes time and again as if those were as perplexing to count as the stars in the sky, certainly to avoid the encounter with their counterparts aimed at me by those who were present there to see my "glowing"

face, that how she could ask me such a question while I worked with her as her student for more than a year and that it would have been far more better for me if she had slapped me rather than thrusting a double-edged question at me.

Anyway, now, when I was trying to sleep the night after the nightmare, I could only manage to pull down my eyelids even though it was past midnight. Many questions as well as thoughts were whirling round my mind which were serving as whirlpools to vanish my sleep-- the stuff which could save me, at least for the time being, from the bottomless blue ocean of torture where I was drowning after my confidence-ship was destroyed by the sudden blow of the accident. "Was that my weakness that I was trying to maintain my religious manners and customs and

so dressed myself accordingly?" "Wasn't she wrong in her suspicion and just trying to insult me?" These were some of those questions I asked myself. I couldn't find any answer to the first question then. As for the second one, for the time being I thought she was.

But right now, while I am driving my pen along a zigzag course to draw a picture of my feelings, I think she was hardly responsible as it's not easy to see through somebody just by looking at them or just by working with them for a period of time. Those who were responsible for the heinous bomb attacks all over the country, who tried and are trying to stigmatise the fame and glory of peace loving people of the country and those of peaceful noble religion Islam, resemble myself outwardly and who knows what's going on into one's mind after

all? Perhaps it was the reason that I fell victim to her suspicion. But it's high time that the authorities took proper steps to find out the criminals to retrieve and retain the reputation of the country and Islam as an advocate of peace and thereby save the pious true Muslims from being the victim of others' suspicion. At the same time I request everyone to judge the situation correctly and refrain from suspecting everybody.

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Dr Ahmed's piece

I always enjoyed in the past the writings of Dr Ahmed. Certainly, he writes well. From his recent reply that appeared in this column it seems Dr Ahmed has been residing in the US since the period of Bangla-

desh's liberation war with a distinguished career. It is indeed a very long time and he deserves an applause for this.

Lately, on the subject of terrorism in Bangladesh his views puzzled the readers, including myself. Certainly it appears to me that Dr Ahmed is not consistent with his arguments on the so-called Islamic terrorism world wide. Many of us who are also residing in the western democracies for a long period of time were surprised to see his piece on the subject of the recent letter of the US Senators.

Dr Moazzem Hossain
Brisbane, Australia

Crime

It is not my intention to encourage any sort of crime whatsoever in Bangladesh, but my objective is to express my viewpoint on the causes

of crime. Bangladesh is the most densely populated (also underdeveloped) country in the world. Most of us live under poverty line in terms of living standard. With so many people unhappy and crammed in a small place, commotion of any kind is possible, I believe.

If we consider the size of the population, I find that there are more crimes in the US even though it has sophisticated and modern techniques to tackle crime. I think the same is true about China and India (if I am not wrong).

With an increase in population, other factors will also increase.

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Discrimination in

BUET

BUET has proven itself to be the best university of the country. But sometimes we are appalled to find this university not performing up to our expectations. The recent pan-democracy in BUET triggered by both the students and the authorities is an example of things going wrong here.

"BUET can't remain closed for one week for only twenty percent minority students," when the head of a large institute makes a comment like this, then it's really sad. When in every educational institute of Bangladesh the students of Hindu community enjoy a one week vacation for Durga Puja, the BUET authorities reduced it to one day only.

Kamrul Hasan
BUET