

## Probe report on August 17 bombings

*Govt should make public what it knows*

THE government committee that was formed to probe the August 17 bomb blasts has suggested that the banned JMB did not have the money, manpower, and network to pull off such an audacious attack alone, and that it must have been assisted by a vested third party either inside or outside the country. This comes hard on the heels of the PM's statement that the government knows who was behind the August 17 attack.

The most troubling aspect of both communiqués is their lack of specificity. If the government knows who was behind the attack, then why can this information not be shared with us? If there are vested interests, who might these vested interests be, and what is the evidence that has been gleaned in support of these allegations?

The public remains very much in the dark as to the bombings. We need to know more to ensure that the government is fulfilling its responsibilities and to make the public feel secure. We would like to know what steps the government is taking or has contemplated. It must be remembered that August 17, while unique in scope, was hardly an isolated incident.

The government's approach must be different than before, and it must include full disclosure. One of the problems with all previous investigations was their opacity, as though the government thought that by sweeping the matter under the rug that things would be forgotten. But this time this will not be enough.

So far as we can see with respect to the investigation, the sole point of concern seems to be to arrest JMB heads Abdur Rahman and Siddiqul Islam (so-called Bangla Bhai who ill deserves such a sobriquet). The fact that the two have so far evaded capture (and recall that they have officially been wanted men since the JMB was banned in February) suggests that they are being sheltered by some powerful figure or figures.

The question is why they have not been captured, and if they are being sheltered, who might their sponsors be? It is time for the government to come clean and share with the public what it knows in order to restore its credibility on the matter. The country needs answers.

## A special thought for the sightless

*We need currency notes usable by the blind*

Right to sight is a highly relevant and appropriate agenda at this time deserving to be adopted within the national healthcare policy framework of the government as a priority concern.

It has to be noted though, that the people blessed with eyesight but deeply concerned over the plight of the blind have raised the right to sight slogan for their sightless fellow-beings. But given the high incidence of blindness, partial and complete, across the globe and, in a poor developing country like Bangladesh, the time is ripe for the sightless themselves, especially the partially blind and the curable ones, to be demanding vision as a matter of right. A total of 37 million people are blind the world over, even though 75 percent of this blindness was curable and preventable. In Bangladesh, 1,50,000 people go blind every year, with some six million suffering from low vision, as it is. Eighty-five percent of the blindness results from cataracts which were removable through surgical intervention.

Blindness among children, in particular, is preventable. Corneal scarring is treatable, so can cataracts be gotten rid of, early in the day. But most of all, making up for vitamin 'A' deficiency can do wonders in keeping child or adolescent blindness at bay. Actually, awareness building programmes to sensitise people about sightlessness and community-based preventive measures must go hand in hand so as to markedly reduce the incidence of blindness. Let's not forget, the incidence in Bangladesh surpasses the regional average.

The hard fact is we have a sizable blind population on our hands. One of the major things they are in dire need of, to get by on a daily basis, is the currency notes which are unfortunately user-unfriendly as far as they go. They cannot tell the differences between legal tenders of different denominations -- Taka ten, fifty, hundred or five hundred notes -- by the mere sensation of touching them.

What the government needs to do, therefore, is to etch distinguishing marks on the notes in Braille such as on the US dollar bills exclusively minted for their blind population so that they can carry out financial transactions conveniently and efficiently -- with some jest in life to top it off.

# India and Pakistan edge towards detente

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THE India-Pakistan peace process is slowly but surely moving in the right direction. The frequent summit-level meetings between the two countries have definitely given a new momentum in the bilateral ties between these arch-rivals that have fought three wars since their independence from British rule. President Pervez Musharraf, under the guise of "cricket diplomacy," visited New Delhi last spring, spent an hour watching a match between the two countries, and then the rest of the time meeting high Indian leadership to reach broad agreement on important bilateral areas. Within weeks, Musharraf met the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for the second time on the sidelines of the Bandung Summit to consolidate the spirit of friendship. Last month, he again met the Indian Premier during the UN Summit in New York.

Consequently, there has been a series of ministerial and high official-level meetings between the two countries in recent months and new areas have been identified for bilateral cooperation. After long 16 years the Indo-Pakistan Joint Commission has been revived. Foreign Ministers Natwar Singh and Khurshid Kasuri headed their respective delegations at the just concluded session in Islamabad, which produced concrete results. Two agreements have been signed in the areas of pre-notification of flight-testing of ballistic missiles and the memorandum of understanding for the establishment of channel of communication link between the two maritime security

authorities. More importantly, the two sides have undertaken discussions to evolve a road map for the demilitarisation of Siachen glaciers and Sir Creek dispute relating to the delimitation of their maritime boundaries. More progress is expected in these two sensitive areas at the next round of composite talks in January.

Experts believe that the Indo-Pakistan accords will have highly favourable impact in three main areas, namely the security sector,

established between Mumbai-Karachi and Lahore-New Delhi sectors; rail link has been restored between Wagah and the Khokrapar. Bus services have already been established between Lahore and New Delhi and more importantly, between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar in Kashmir. The two countries have also agreed to establish bus services between Amritsar and Lahore, and Amritsar and Nankana Sahib. India and Pakistan are setting up consul-

tension, such as establishment of bus link between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar, greater intra-Kashmir contacts, APHC meetings and now the broad agreement on the thorny issue of Siachen.

Even at the sub-regional level, this significant improvement in bilateral ties has led India to sign a multi-billion dollar three-nation gas pipeline accord with Pakistan and Iran. Previously, India had deep reservations about supply of Iranian gas

disappeared. Since the 9/11 attacks in US, Pakistan had been under pressure from Washington to curb terrorist activities in Kashmir and resume negotiations with India. Kashmir is a highly sensitive domestic issue in Pakistan and it was indeed a difficult task to readjust their policy, and he has so far handled the situation well. Musharraf understands that without frequent summit level contacts the peace process, particularly the composite dialogue, would get

hazardous path, and all sides have to exercise utmost caution and restraint.

How does this improved India-Pakistan tie impact the South Asian region? Well, relations between these two Asian nuclear powers have a direct bearing on peace, security, and development of the region. Their past hostilities had made the region the "most dangerous flash point" in the world, and had profound negative impact on the entire region, which is one of the poorest in the world. Despite recent GDP growth, 43 per cent of South Asians still live below the poverty line. In the global context, South Asia lags behind other regions of the world in terms of income and human development index. The recent UN Development Report has once again put the South Asian countries at the bottom rung of the table.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) was launched two decades ago to hasten the process of development and to alleviate poverty in this densely populated area through regional cooperation. Unfortunately, mainly due to hostilities between India and Pakistan, Saarc has largely failed to achieve its mandated tasks. Now that the wind of change is blowing, there are reasons for optimism. It is expected that the next summit would be able to take concrete action in the areas of poverty alleviation and launching of the South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta). Saarc has adopted a series of declarations in the past. It is high time to work for their implementation.

Syed Muazem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

**The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) was launched two decades ago to hasten the process of development and to alleviate poverty in this densely populated area through regional cooperation. Unfortunately, mainly due to hostilities between India and Pakistan, Saarc has largely failed to achieve its mandated tasks. Now that the wind of change is blowing, there are reasons for optimism.**

economic cooperation and greater people-to-people contact between the two countries. The pre-notification accord and the earlier agreement on prohibiting attacks on nuclear facilities are significant confidence building measures between the two Asian nuclear powers, which had been on the brink of a nuclear showdown in the summer of 2002. The establishment of a channel of communication between the two maritime security authorities would significantly reduce the humanitarian problem created due to arrest of fishermen of both countries who unknowingly stray into the territorial waters of the other country.

However, the most visible change of improved bilateral ties is in the areas of transportation between the two countries. New links have been established and old links have been restored to facilitate greater people to people contacts. Air links have been

established in Karachi and Mumbai respectively, and efforts are being made to simplify visa system to facilitate travel between the two countries.

It is true that both sides have not so far directly addressed the core issue of Kashmir; nonetheless, the negotiating atmosphere has radically changed. Previously, Islamabad used to maintain that Kashmir issue has to be resolved first before any progress could be made in other areas of bilateral cooperation. New Delhi, on the other hand, used to insist that Pakistan must completely curb all terrorist activities and movement of militants from their side of the Line of Control (LOC) before any discussions of the issue. Both sides have now significantly softened their stand. Islamabad has dropped that prerequisite and seriously curbs movement of all militants and terrorist activities.

During recent months, important steps have been taken to reduce

through Pakistan, and had asked Iran to consider the sea route as an alternative. This was both expensive and time-consuming. The mistrust has disappeared and all sides are now interested in the early implementation of this mutually beneficial project.

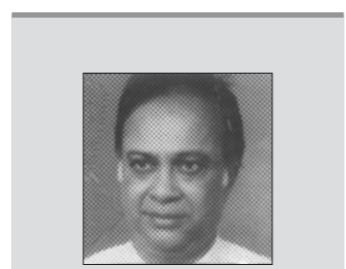
The path to peace process is indeed a long and thorny one, and any sudden escalation of terrorist activities along the LOC may jeopardise the whole process. However, both sides are trying to make the process irreversible so that the cost of cooperation could outweigh the cost of confrontation. They have also bent backwards to accommodate each other's compulsions.

Nevertheless, the flexibility and pragmatism demonstrated by President Musharraf is remarkable. The hard-line position that he had taken at the ill-fated Agra Summit a little over three years ago has

bogged down at the official and ministerial level meetings. Hence he goes out of his way to meet the Indian leadership to keep up the momentum. Manmohan Singh's government has been very responsive to his overtures.

It is necessary to point out that, despite current progress in talks, there are serious compulsions on both sides on the core issue of Kashmir. Pakistan cannot officially accept the existing LOC as the international boundary, and India will not be able to make any major concession on the issue. So what both sides are currently trying to achieve is to demilitarise the region, promote greater intra-Kashmir contacts, and to restore normalcy in the troubled region. It is expected that, once normalcy is restored and normal economic activities are resumed, the benefit of peace itself will be the best safeguard against terrorist activities. It is a delicate and

# Let's be prepared for next catastrophe



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE devastating earthquakes striking parts of Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan have once again brought to the fore man's helplessness in the face of the onslaught of nature. Thousands have been killed, many more injured, and lakhs affected by the catastrophe that has particularly hit with severity of unbelievable proportion the Kashmir region controlled by both India and Pakistan.

The colossal destruction wrought by the disaster is yet to be fully assessed, but undoubtedly it is simply horrifying. Two main South Asian nations have been afflicted by this and the third -- Afghanistan -- is close to this region as evidenced by the fact that it has expressed interest to become a member of the South Asian regional forum, Saarc.

Natural disasters also hit this region early this year when the fury of water in the form of tsunami caused serious damages in three South Asian countries -- Sri Lanka, India, and the Maldives, and these nations are still reeling under its effect. These two destructive acts of nature in one single year leave no one in doubt that this region is prone to the damage of the whims of

nature, and the destruction can be simply staggering. True, it is difficult to contain such disasters, but it is possible to evolve mechanisms that can respond quickly to the requirement and minimise the consequences.

South Asian nations can also work for the regional platform that can help in various areas of natural disasters, although disasters seem a fait accompli for the unfortunate people.

Such disasters are not a new phe-

nomon as countries -- rich or poor and big or small -- are helpless victims to the fury of nature. Despite tremendous technological and other advancement, the world is vulnerable to natural onslaughts. The only superpower of the world -- the United States -- could do little in face of Hurricane Katrina in recent times, even the relief operations were not without criticisms.

It is a matter of common knowledge that South Asia, along with its adjacent region South East Asia, is a calamity-prone area, and countries here have had enough of the onslaughts of natural disasters. Catastrophic floods, storms, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, and other menaces caused by nature are a regular occurrences in this part of the world, while many other areas are also vulnerable to these happenings. Men are largely helpless

in such situation, but effective and timely application of science can certainly reduce the consequences of such effects.

Early warning system, adequate pre-disaster preparedness and speedy post-occurrence management system are some of the measures that can definitely reduce the chances, and more importantly, lessen scale of devastation likely to be wrought by the disaster. It is not that these possibili-

ties are not being thought of or efforts are not being made in this line to save the calamity-susceptible nations as far as possible. But what is urgently felt is the need for more serious bid in that direction on the basis of utmost priority and placement of resources, even if there is constraint on part of the countries desperately need protection from natural disasters. It appears that such a drive is somewhat lacking even though there is no dearth of anxiety and concern as well as talks of probable steps to mitigate the causes and consequences.

The tsunami tragedy first underlined the need for the dire need of anti-disaster measures on a regional plane, and this has received particular attention since the deluge of unimaginable magnitude took lives of more than a quarter million hapless people in

South and South East Asia. It struck Indonesia, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, and luckily Bangladesh was escaped, although this country was broadly in the same zone. This time also the earthquakes had murmurs in Bangladesh too, but once again Bangladesh was left almost unscathed.

Bangladesh is vulnerable to natural disasters and we terribly experienced these happenings highlighted by the catastrophes of 1970, 1988, 1998, and

regional requirement and priorities. This will be beneficial for individual nations as well as collectively. It goes without saying that a venture like disaster prevention in South Asia needs collective endeavour, and larger international support and assistance are also required for the purpose.

It can be concluded that international help will not be absent as reflected by the fact that the sympathy demonstrated in the aftermath of the

look at the issue of disaster management and related matters in the wake of the tsunami and the earthquake experience, and must devote itself concretely to the disaster issue which is inextricably linked with the fate of the region, where countless perish and huge properties are destroyed at regular intervals by nature.

As the South Asian nations under the banner of Saarc are sparing no efforts to improve their economic and social condition through collective endeavour despite occasional strain on the grouping and sluggish progress made by the forum, all avenues are being explored for multi-faceted cooperation in various fields.

But the natural disaster-prone South Asia must take up the issue of cooperation in this field on a priority basis.

It is not only that disasters bring tragedies of enormous proportions, but also badly damage and even at times wipe out assiduously built developmental infrastructure. And this destruction undoubtedly covers agriculture, road and other communications as well as some other vital sectors which are critically important for the development and welfare of the people. Disasters often obviate progress made in different fields, and it is imperative that anti-disaster plans and progress are taken up with all seriousness.

The issue is crucially important for the Saarc region, and its leaders must take it up with collective spirit for developing necessary mechanism, following the untold miseries and destruction caused by two catastrophes in quick succession in one single year.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is the Foreign Editor of BSS.

## MATTERS AROUND US

**Saarc must take a new look at the issue of disaster management and related matters in the wake of the tsunami and the earthquake experience, and must devote itself concretely to the disaster issue which is inextricably linked with the fate of the region, where countless perish and huge properties are destroyed at regular intervals by nature.**

nomon as countries -- rich or poor and big or small -- are helpless victims to the fury of nature. Despite tremendous technological and other advancement, the world is vulnerable to natural onslaughts. The only superpower of the world -- the United States -- could do little in face of Hurricane Katrina in recent times, even the relief operations were not without criticisms.

It is a matter of common knowledge that South Asia, along with its adjacent region South East Asia, is a calamity-prone area, and countries here have had enough of the onslaughts of natural disasters. Catastrophic floods, storms, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, and other menaces caused by nature are a regular occurrences in this part of the world, while many other areas are also vulnerable to these happenings. Men are largely helpless

ties are not being thought of or efforts are not being made in this line to save the calamity-susceptible nations as far as possible. But what is urgently felt is the need for more serious bid in that direction on the basis of utmost priority and placement of resources, even if there is constraint on part of the countries desperately need protection from natural disasters. It appears that such a drive is somewhat lacking even though there is no dearth of anxiety and concern as well as talks of probable steps to mitigate the causes and consequences.

The tsunami tragedy first underlined the need for the dire need of anti-disaster measures on a regional plane, and this has received particular attention since the deluge of unimaginable magnitude took lives of more than a quarter million hapless people in

other occasions. A country often described as calamity-prone by the international world, the world conference on disaster management in Kobe, Japan, a few months ago focused especially on the handicaps caused by nature on such nations. The leader of the Bangladesh delegation, Food and Disaster Management Minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, had the honour of presenting one of two keynote papers in the large and important gathering participated in by the most of the world's countries and opened by no less a person than the Emperor of Japan in a rare gesture. The other keynote presenter was former chief of the UNHCR Dr. Sadako Ogata.

The next Saarc summit in the Bangladesh capital, scheduled for next month, should pick up the message of the Kobe conference suiting the

tsunami was more appealing in the Western nations, particularly among their people whose hearts went out in sympathy to the dead and affected in South and South East Asia. Some leaders of powerful nations were criticised by their own people and their press for either not acting immediately or inadequately for the calamity hit countries. School children, top celebrities of cine and music world, sports figures, and heads of government of some countries spared no efforts to stand by the suffering humanity. The same gesture is more or less witnessed in the aftermath of the earthquakes in South Asia.

The Kobe conference has thrown up several effective ideas for disaster prevention and mitigating consequences, including effective early warning system. Saarc must take a new

## OPINION

# The mystery of flawed logic

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

SENATOR Edward Kennedy (Massachusetts Democrat) was a staunch supporter of the liberation war of Bangladesh. And he has remained so. The Pakistani military with the help of their local quislings carried out brutal oppression in Bangladesh in 1971, against which the Massachusetts Democrat Senator raised voice. There were other politicians and intellectuals in the US who were friends of Bangladesh. Many of the supporters of Bangladesh who in taking a favourable position towards the liberation war of Bangladesh went against the official pro-Pakistan policy of the United States government were from the New England area.

For example, Michael Walzer in a speech at Harvard criticised the Pakistan military for carrying out repression in Bangladesh to the displeasure of Ms. Benazir Bhutto, a student at that time. Pundit Ravi Shankar, George Harrison, Ali Akbar Khan, Alla Rakha Khan, Bob Dylan, et

al organised the famous Concert for Bangladesh in Madison Square Garden, New York and not in Boise, Idaho.

What did it prove? Only New England states and liberal New York were interested in Bangladesh or were outraged by the brutality of Pakistani repression? Was that a mystery as well? Yes, if we follow the logic of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed from Princeton. What has geography or number of people got to do with the expression of moral outrage?

Bangladeshi lobbyists in the US during the liberation war, namely, Rehman Sobhan, late Dr. Enayet Rahim, et al were visiting college campuses and influencing public opinion including the politicians. Who knows? But it is not the geography but the substance of the issue at hand that is important. The geography of support or opposition can be successfully manipulated by the present US administration to justify its illegal and immoral war in Iraq by saying that a large number of intellectuals opposing the war are from the elite universi-

**Trying to hunt for mysteries and conspiracies only obfuscates issues that are of great importance for Bangladesh as a nation. Corruption, political violence, and the rise of religious extremism are issues that need to be dealt with by all, regardless of political position, no matter whether US lawmakers take interest in these issues or not. These are our problems and if we do not deal with them now they will paralyse us and haunt our posterity.**

ties which are geographically located in and around New England. For example late Edward Said was from Columbia University, New York; Noam Chomsky is from MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Paul Krugman and Richard Falk are from Princeton University, New Jersey; Immanuel Wallerstein is from Yale University, etc. Surely, they are not geographically well represented. But so what?

Why was the letter to Secretary Rice not published in the American press? The point is simple. Bangladesh does not loom large on the horizon of US interest contrary to perceptions in sections of left-intellectuals and naive politicians in Bangladesh. Why was there no meeting between George W and our honourable Prime Minister?

The same reason: Bangladesh is not a key partner of the US nor are we a client state. And on publishing news related to Bangladesh in *The New York Times*, or other print media in the US, we have not done well. The US media is interested in representing our disasters and only in rare occasions our blips of success stories such as Grameen Bank of Professor Yunus.

To impute that the letter does not exist or the US congressmen did not sign the letter is cynical, if not preposterous. However, what is preposterous is to compare the US judiciary with that of Bangladesh. US judiciary has its shortcomings like many other judicial systems. And in recent years, it has come under criticism. But the stance of the US judiciary with regards to

Guantanamo Bay deserves respect. Anyone interested to pursue this point should refer to two court cases: Hamdi vs. Rumsfeld and Shafiq Rasul et al vs. George Walker Bush et al". I have reasons to believe that there are many men and women of impeccable integrity in the Bangladesh judiciary, but because of our political culture, we are still behind the US and other advanced democracies in separating the judiciary from the executive branch of the government. In the USA, you are innocent until proven guilty (this principle has been somewhat overshadowed only recently by Homeland Security Act); in Bangladesh you are basically guilty until proven innocent. At least, that's what it appears when I read in the newspapers of arrests on

suspicion (and later "shown" to be arrested on this or that charge) and extra-judicial killings.

Taking a critical stance of US foreign and military policies does not mean that we should part company with our sense of objectivity.

It is true that the US is not even-handed in her criticisms of political violence in the world. US policies of looking the other way when it comes to Israel's violent behaviour is well-known, but that cannot be used as an excuse for overlooking our own political violence. With regard to communal riots in India, especially Gujarat, I am not aware of the reactions of the US government, but at a future date the infamous Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi was refused visa to

visit the US. That does not look like a position of indifference to me. One of the most memorable pieces on Gujarat in an American paper (*The New York Review of Books*, August 2002) by Mr. Pankaj Misra did play a role in shaping the opinion of the intellectuals and the discerning sections of the American public.

What taxes my credulity is when I read Dr. Ahmed saying: "I cannot believe that the US legislators would quote TI and would be so mean-spirited to take such a swipe at Bangladesh. They are far too decent and classy to be so crass." The question is: is corruption rife in Bangladesh or not? And the unequivocal answer is: yes. To question the seriousness of the problem of corruption in Bangladesh is crass.

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, a regular contributor to *The Daily Star* whose writings are well-liked by many readers, does recognise the problem of political violence in Bangladesh and suggests some thoughtful measures. He makes a good point by referring to

another commentator as to why US lawmakers did not take an equal interest in the attempt on the life of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Again, the US government was not indifferent to that dastardly act that led to the death of 21 people. Secretary Rice did call the Leader of the Opposition to express her concern. But trying to hunt for mysteries and conspiracies only obfuscates issues that are of great importance for Bangladesh as a nation. Corruption, political violence, and the rise of religious extremism are issues that need to be dealt with by all, regardless of political position, no matter whether US lawmakers take interest in these issues or not. These are our problems and if we do not deal with them now they will paralyse us and haunt our posterity. It is reassuring to read that our security forces, especially the much maligned police force, has shown glimmers of success by arresting some of the suspects in recent weeks. They deserve praise and support.

Habibul Haque Khondker teaches sociology at the National University of Singapore.