

BNP bosses' make-believe world

Listen to the grassroots leaders, please

NEITHER hollow words nor meaningless palliatives will cut ice with the public. This was the loud and clear message delivered by the grassroots level leaders of the BNP to their bosses in Dhaka. Regrettably, comments and pronouncements of the BNP top brasses on national issues remain so far removed from reality as to make one wonder whether they will ever get out of their make-believe world and face the facts. This was made very poignantly clear once again from the discordant views, of that of the BNP high ups and their party men at the lower levels, that emerged at the venue.

It is not difficult to imagine the level of desperation that people must have been driven to, that has compelled them to speak the unpalatable, even at the risk of invoking the displeasure of their top leadership. Should it fail to arrest, among other things, the unbridled price hike, the BNP will face a grim prospect in the next election, a great majority of the grassroots BNP leaders at the meeting opined. And they said what the public are saying; people will not be taken in by the ludicrous statement of the government that the prices of things are the lowest in Bangladesh and the rise in purchasing power will help them absorb the increase in prices of essentials. Whatever 'acclaimed successes' of the government there may be, it has been negated at home by galloping prices.

While one must credit the BNP for arranging meetings with their party men belonging to the lowest tiers of the organisation, to elicit their views on issues of national importance, one cannot but be disappointed that some senior BNP leaders chose to brush aside what their ordinary party men had to say, particularly on the issue of price hike. And just when their party men were delivering the unpalatable, the top BNP brasses chose to indulge in their old hobbyhorse of blaming the media.

Instead of putting the blame elsewhere, it will be well for the BNP's top leadership to take heed of what their grassroots representatives have to say, for they voice the reality, and work to put things right.

Easy prey to trafficking

Awareness and vigil required

THOUGH less talked about, it is one of the major issues of human rights facing Bangladesh today. The targeted victims are amongst the rural poor whose parents and relatives, driven by sheer poverty, allow their wards to be hijacked away from their home on payment of cash and promise of employment abroad. Many of them might not have had any guardian at all.

Child trafficking is basically a social crime and, therefore, needs to be primarily dealt with at the community level. We strongly feel that mass awareness should be built against such an organised crime. The electronic media with its long reach can be an effective vehicle for putting across the right messages to the rural audience, in particular. The authorities could organise programmes aimed at exposing the traps laid by trafficking rackets as well as illustrating the dangers of talking to complete strangers in different modes of transport like trains, buses and launches.

The programme should simultaneously send signals to prospective evildoers about the severity of punishment as envisaged in the law applicable to child trafficking. Extensive media coverage could be given to examples of speedy dispensation of justice already meted out and punishment given to perpetrators of the crime. One wonders as to what happened to a number of cases involving trafficking of children for use as camel jockeys in some of the Arab countries.

On the policing side, some reinforced measures are needed. We already have some police presence in trains and launches. The members of law enforcement agencies and the transport operators should be especially motivated and trained in dealing with prospective offenders. This could be organized without any additional cost or extraordinary effort on the part of either the administration or the respective transport operators.

Child trafficking should be dealt with severely. It has already reached alarming proportions damaging the nation's credibility both at home and abroad. We are highly concerned about it.

AIR CDRE ISHFAQ ILAHI
CHOUDHURY,

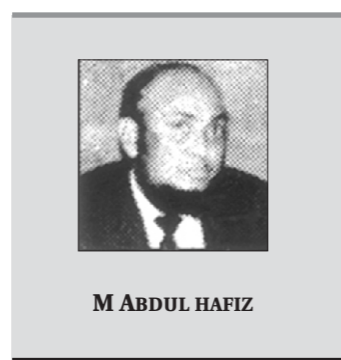
THE International Conference of Islamic Scholars held in Dhaka (September 23-25) was a commendable effort by the organisers to highlight the humane face of Islam and condemn the violent trend that is attempting to occupy the centre stage. However, the conference, held in the China-Bangladesh Friendship Conference Centre, was high in pomp and grandeur, but low in popular enthusiasm. While the participants in the capital's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar were emphasising the message of peace and goodwill in Islam, just a mile away, a crowd of violent Friday worshippers were attempting to march on the Ahmadiya Mosque in Nakhla para area. Those preaching moderation inside the ornate Conference Hall were not audible outside.

Speakers in the conference were

eulogising Bangladesh as "a moderate Muslim state." This is a term coined by the Americans in the 90s, and our politicians and intellectuals parrot it like a *mantra*. The question is, "If some are moderate Muslim states, then are there others who are extreme?" How do we categorise? What are the criteria that determine 'moderates' and 'extremes'? Can we call countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran or Pakistan 'extreme'? How do we interact with 'extreme' states? There is no answer to these questions. In fact, we should shun such labels.

Instead, we should emphasise that Bangladesh is a democratic country, the majority of whose population are Muslim by religion, just as they are Bengali by ethnicity, or agriculturists by profession, and so on. When we say Bangladesh belongs to Islamic Ummah (Nation), we straight away deprive at least 10 per cent of our population of their nationhood. We can never build a

The nation at a cross-road



M ABDUL HAFIZ

WH O E V E R masterminded the August 17 attack by exploding 500 bombs in 63 districts did it consciously and with a purpose. That it had not been done on mere impulse was clear when in less than two months the courts in Chittagong, Chandpur, and Laxmipur were attacked with more lethal bombs. The perpetrators of the crime meant business and were read to go to any extent to achieve their objectives. In other words, they threw down a challenge to the existing system of our statecraft and announced their intention to impose their values on us, if required, by force. They made no bones about it and gave their objectives in printed leaflets left by them on both occasions.

The national security of a country is at stake when its founding principles - also known as the nation's core values -- are challenged. The country is not a mere geographical expression and it is a complete entity only when

founded to preserve certain values. The challenge now becoming palpable did not come suddenly. In the aftermath of the gory events of another August thirty years ago, the nation's care values enshrined in our constitution were, for the first time, tampered with. Since then, the founding principles of the nation for which three millions courted martyrdom inexorably eroded, paving the road for the adventure of power-hungry clerics. In the ensuing struggle for

independence no one raised a question about its legitimacy. It was only in the aftermath of the August 15 tragedy that the new wielders of power, still lacking legitimacy, tampered with our values by distorting most of them.

But in the public consciousness, it is the same values that continue to provide the raison d'etre for our nationhood, the ramparts of which are now under assault. The rise of "Islamic" militants -- hitherto thought

connection with both the August 17 and October 3 episodes are alarming indeed. The militants' organisational spread, their indoctrination, standard military training, resources required for guerilla style operation, hide-outs all over the country, and above all, significant public support, make the problem intractable. Enjoying impunity and official patronage, they have grown to a level of becoming a Frankenstein's monster for their creators

nents of the alliance government.

Creating fantasies of sharia rule is by and large the preserve of the Middle East's hereditary rulers, but few can match them in denying democracy, human rights, women's rights, and social progress. Pakistan once opted for sharia rule under General Ziaul Huq to perpetuate his military rule. Pakistan, from the beginning played with the religious politics in domestic power game, but later day rulers including Z A

indiscriminately trading in its great name for the sake of power, position, and recognition. To bring glory to Islam does not require power. The caliphs of Medina conquered half of the world known at that time when they virtually had nothing. Most of Islam's great conquests were the result of the opponents' voluntary surrender. It is not understood why our clerics hanker after power, and that too, through dirty means, killing innocent people with bombs while pretending piety.

We can only wish good sense will dawn on them. Given the nexus found between parts of the government and the militants, little can be expected to happen on the official front. It is only the people who can resist the calculated onslaught on our values and way of life. The greatness of Islam lies more in its piety, humanity, tolerance, justice, and compassion for the weak and oppressed, which all are in consonance with our value system. So we have nothing to fear from Islamic militants who are only trivialising the great faith. Let our resistance not be subjected to any political consideration. Let it rather be a last ditch battle for our survival. We are at a fork in the road. Choosing the wrong path will spell doom for us.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

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power they have thrown down the gauntlet. Is there anyone to pick it up?

The Bengali nation has thousand years of history of its own and developed its own culture, values, and principles, and Islam is, of course, an inseparable part of them. The value system -- Bengali nationalism, secularism, socialism, and democracy -- provided the dynamism behind our great liberation struggle, right from 1952, and in the process gained widescale legitimacy with the people's spontaneous support. During the long years of our liberation war and even after the country's

to be an impossibility -- has put us face to face with a dangerous reality. The militants are already on the war-path and want us to embrace sharia rule in this country by making a complete U-turn in our political culture and abandoning our dearly held beliefs. This is a direct threat to our survival as nation, but who would rescue us from the impending catastrophic? We are at a fork, we have to decide without any vacillation -- once and for all -- which way should we proceed.

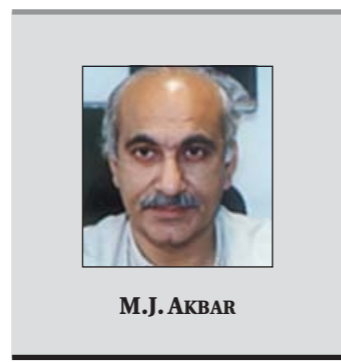
The prognosis cast by the revelations made by those apprehended in

who can hardly control them any more. What the government did in this regard to gain some political mileage will have to be paid back by the nation in a big way. As the militants have only bared their fangs, the government is off-balance, and in spite of its bravado to wipe out terror, so far the establishment is bogged down in a series of inconsequential enquiries and interrogations. Its ability to bring to light the facts behind numerous terror actions believed to be committed by the Islamic militants is seriously handicapped by the Islamic compo-

Bhutto and Ziaul Huq (inspire of their ideological difference) over-Islamised Pakistan. So much so that after his mantra of enlightened moderation failed to make much dent, a frustrated President Musharraf of Pakistan now wants to fashion his country as a modern secular state, as envisioned by its founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and hardly hides his penchant for secular Turkey.

The religion of Islam is simply great. Ordinary mortals like us can seldom measure up its greatness. Yet some of our half-baked clerics are

Very private sector



M. J. AKBAR

THE family reunites at least twice in a lifetime, once to celebrate a birth, and again to mourn a death and comfort the living. A tragedy beyond our control can become an opportunity within our means. Death has placed an immense print across the north of the Indian subcontinent, in the shadow of the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush. Have the divided emotions of our subcontinent been jolted into some realignment by the massive earthquake from Kashmir to the Frontier?

The balance sheet is positive. To expect much more would perhaps be foolish. Money is always useful, but the vital need at such times is the immediate dispatch of materials: waterproof tents, sheets and shoes, beds, blankets (winter has arrived), gensets, milk powder, analgesics, antibiotics, artificial limbs. India makes much of what is immediately needed and sent it by air and train. The government of Dr Manmohan Singh has been not only quick to respond to a neighbour, but very effective in rushing relief to quake-affected Jammu-and-Kashmiris. The personal involvement of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed in the relief operations was visible. The Army responded with emergency speed, and its work in remote areas like Tangdar and Uri will be remembered by the people. The CPI(M), in an effective gesture, gave a donation

of Rs 5 lakhs to the Pak high commissioner. After some unnecessary initial hesitation, help was received in Pakistan as gracefully as it was sent from India. Shoaib Akhtar was talking on behalf of his countrymen when he told Australian television in Sydney about Indian generosity. Islamabad went many steps further, and accepted aid from Israel. From such seeds will change emerge, slowly, and if the seeds are nurtured.

works well in Bengal because it sidesteps large portions of the middle class and goes directly to the peasant and worker for its support. Muslims and Yadavs are natural allies under Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav because they do not have a vested interest in communal conflict. When there is conflict between the two, it is almost always artificially engineered by the dangerous mix of lies, innuendo,

exception of Parsis and multinational) during the fifties, sixties, seventies and perhaps even the eighties will confirm this.

But the nature of Indian private sector has changed dramatically in the last twenty years. There has been a significant shift from traditional families to entrepreneurs, who have not only established new, highly successful businesses, but also bought failed brands and revived

BYLINE

I wonder what the greatest of the modern entrepreneurs, Dhirubhai Ambani, would have done. During my last meeting with him before his stroke, over a longish lunch, he had only one subject: improving India-Pakistan relations, because he believed that it was the only way to ensure the prosperity of both nations. Dhirubhai Ambani would have invested in the one commodity that is priceless, and whose returns are immeasurable, the good will of the people.

The debate in India swivelled around a sub-theme: why was corporate India so abstemious? It queued up to donate when an earthquake ravaged Gujarat; where are the photographs of cheques being handed to the PM's relief fund this time? It is time to bring the question out of the closet. Is corporate India communal?

As a broad theory it is safe to say that the rich in India and Pakistan are far more communal than the poor. Of course they pretend not to be, and either disguise their truth in deceptive manners or reserve it for closed door discussions when like speaks to like. Historically, divisive politics was led by the elite: either the Muslim landlords of UP and Bihar or their Hindu counterparts of Bengal, along with the rising and newly assertive bania in north and central India. If you examine the major political formations in India, you realise that ideology is created not only from top-down but also from bottom-up. Marxist secularism

and the deliberate manipulation of crowd-mania. This makes, aberrations apart, the two Yadav parties secular in spirit as well as behaviour. Mayawati's Dalit formation, the Bahujan Samaj Party, may be sectarian (as indeed others are) but it is not communal. The ideology which spawned the BJP, hostility to Pakistan, and aggression towards Indian Muslims, fits smoothly with the general sentiments of the trading community which constitutes its most loyal support base.

The Congress, which gets support (or not) across the classes and castes, tends to respond with variable emphasis, depending on which element of its platform is making a demand. It can travel easily from quasi-communal to proto-secular. India's private sector emerged, by and large, from its trading class; and its primary instincts, inflamed by partition, were anti-Muslim. A cursory look at jobs given to Indian Muslims in the private sector in Bengal and the north (with the

them. The names who dominate the telecommunication and aviation sectors, for instance, were unknown in 1980, or very marginal. Entrepreneurship, financed by bank or market capital, is driven by profitability, not family networks and influence-peddling. Muslims could succeed as easily, or with as much difficulty, as anyone else: CIPLA and WIPRO, giants in pharma-ceuticals and IT, are owned by Indian Muslims. The rapid, even astonishing, growth in non-traditional businesses like outsourcing left no time for communal bias in hiring: competence was the only criterion, because whatever religion might do for the head and the heart, it had no influence whatsoever on the bottom line. A parallel arrival of a new, generally overseas-educated, generation in traditional business groups, like the Calcutta Marwaris, played its own role in eliminating bias.

Let me provide some completely unscientific data as evidence. It is based on the few eminences of

corporate India that I happened to know socially. They are not intimate friends by any means, but long years of sniffing out communal breath helps one sift. An arbitrary checklist: the Ambani brothers, Mukesh and Anil; Gautam Singhania; Vijay Mallya; the Jain brothers Samir and Vineet; Anand Mahindra; the BPL co-brothers (as they say in the South) Ajit Nambiar and Rajeve Chandrashekhar; the Goenka broth-

amount on either side of the divide, although the destruction in India is far less. Why? That's a no-brainer: because charity begins at home. However, charity does not end at home. Dhirubhai Ambani was utterly loyal and munificent to those who were loyal to him, but he was not generous. It is difficult to be both rich and generous. He was not sentimental. Sentiment and the Ambani clan have never been introduced to each other. He would have done it because he was shrewd.

During my last meeting with him before his stroke, over a longish lunch, he had only one subject: improving India-Pakistan relations, because he believed that it was the only way to ensure the prosperity of both nations. Dhirubhai Ambani would have invested in the one commodity that is priceless, and whose returns are immeasurable, the good will of the people. Maybe if his sons stopped obsessing about each other they might remember what their father dreamt. Companies and industrialists who spend a fortune on advertising campaigns to improve their image, do not seem to understand that governments can rise or fall depending on how they respond to disaster.

The first, terrible week is only the beginning of a story that will take years of narration. Whole villages have to be re-built, lives rehabilitated, children rescued from shock and hope restored to adults. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, clearly a practical man, sees his opportunity in tragedy. Apparently he is planning to turn rubble into model, earthquake-proof villages, hopefully with modern infrastructure. That must be the goal in Jammu and Kashmir as well. Dr Manmohan Singh will readily appreciate that. Will the Indian private sector understand that too?

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An appeal to the Islamic scholars of Bangladesh

Pakistan is a perfect example of the folly of mixing religion with politics -- look what a morass that has led their nation into. I hope our Islamic scholars would face up to address these issues -- the issues of religious intolerance and bigotry nearer at home, instead of directing futile attacks on the Bush-Blair axis.

cohesive nation keeping a significant segment of the population out of the mainstream. If Bangladeshi Muslims belong to "Islamic nation," then could Bangladeshi Hindus, Buddhists or Christians or other indigenous nationalities seek their own religious nationhood? These interesting questions need to be addressed in our nation-building exercise.

During the conference, there was the usual "Bush-Blair" bashing, accusing the West of fomenting violence and extremism in the Islamic world. While there is some truth in it, I would request our Islamic scholars to first clean up our own backyard. Let us start by eliminating extremism at home. Why our Islamic scholars do not condemn

violence against the Ahmadiya community clearly and unequivocally? Some *maulanas* of rather obscure origin are gaining the centre stage by fomenting unrest and instability in the country. They have issued ultimatum to the government to declare the Ahmadiyas as Non-Muslims; otherwise, there would be trouble ahead.

In the list of speakers in the Anti-Ahmadiya rally on October 1, beside *maulanas* from Pakistan, there was a *peer* from India. It is surprising to note that the *peer* traveled to Bangladesh to press his demand, whereas in his own country, India, there is no such clamour, and Ahmadiya Muslims are living in India in peace and harmony. In fact, some time back, I watched on one of the

Indian TV news channels, a huge gathering of Ahmadiyas from all over the world in Qadian, a town in the Indian state of Punjab, which is the birthplace of Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, the founder of the Ahmadiya community. I would urge upon the venerable *peer* from India to first issue ultimatum to his own government before demanding the same from ours. I would also ask our government to refuse entry to troublemakers from abroad. Governments all over the world are tightening the control on the movement of people who preach religious extremism. We should do the same.

While commending the effort of projecting the moderate image of Bangladesh, let me cite a few anomalies amidst us. The issue of

criticising or speaking ill of other religion by our Imams comes to my mind first. Some of our Imams in their Friday prayers seek victory against idol-worshippers, Jews, and Christians. I wonder whether it is the right thing to do while we have Hindus, Buddhists and Christians as citizens of Bangladesh. When the Imams speak against other religions, are they not hurting the sentiments of fellow citizens? Until about a decade ago, such utterances were unheard of; but these are becoming increasingly common now.

How can we foster communal harmony and friendship if our religious leaders keep on preaching from the pulpit against members of other religions? We are witnessing

the fallout of such preaching in our national life. Here is an example. In our childhood days, Durga Puja was occasions of great joy and festivities for all -- Hindus and Muslims. No one ever thought of violence or disturbance in the Puja celebration. Now, we have to create a security blanket, mobilise all the security apparatus so that the Puja celebration can go ahead unhindered. How can one freely enjoy the festivities if the mind is preoccupied with the thoughts of personal safety and security? Despite various security measures, we are getting news of Puja sites in different parts of the country being vandalised by miscreants at night. Is it not a national shame? Why are our Islamic scholars silent about it?

What to speak of other religions, even Islamic religious functions are now under threat of violence. Bombing in Dargahs and Urs ceremonies across the country have been an agonising experience for all of us.

When I saw the picture in the newspaper of the Friday congregation in Baitul Mukarram with armed guards standing on all vantage points, it made me sick all over. What a state of terror we are sinking into. I wonder if we are heading the way of Pakistan, where mosque bombing is routine, where sectarian violence, abetted by religious leaders, kills hundreds every year. Pakistan is a perfect example of the folly of mixing religion with politics -- look what a morass that has led their nation into. I hope our Islamic scholars would face up to address these issues -- the issues of religious intolerance and bigotry nearer at home, instead of directing futile attacks on the Bush-Blair axis.