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Delhi carnage

Let's put our heads together to fight the menace

THE gory blood-bath that soaked the unsuspecting Diwali and Eid shoppers in Delhi's two busy shopping areas is a grim reminder, if reminding is at all necessary, that terrorism has not only taken firm roots, it has also spread far and wide sparing no country or individual. Delhi bombings were an outrageous act of cowardice that deserves the most severe condemnation. Our sympathies are with those that have lost their dear ones and those that are injured.

We are seeing the ugly head of terrorism with horror and consternation. Violence in its different manifestations have been witnessed in Karachi, and in Colombo, in Kathmandu and at home at different times confirming the fact of its broad sweep and terrible destructive powers that no nation or individual can feel immune from. The phenomenon has for quite sometime assumed a global dimension, transversing political boundaries and geographical confines. It is as if terrorism has kept up with the pace of globalisation. Needless to say, this sinister and evil phenomenon has thrived on the networking of the terrorist groups, almost without any hindrance.

If anything, it has once again demonstrated the utter helplessness of even the strongest of nations in the face of terrorism. It has again highlighted the reality that terrorism cannot be tackled alone or in isolation. There is a need to get nations to network in the field of intelligence and information sharing, just in the same manner as the terrorists network to carry out their nefarious designs.

Coming as this painful incident does, on the eve of the 13th SAARC summit, it is by far the strongest message conveyed to our leaders of the need for a coordinated action if terrorism is to be tackled effectively. SAARC has already a Convention on Terrorism, which needs to be fully operationalised without delay, and if necessary, the provisions of the Convention should be made more in line with the complexity of the challenge.

The forthcoming Summit is very appropriately taking up the issue of fighting the menace, but what we need is well-defined action plan to fight terrorism rather than mere expression of intent.

We urge the SAARC leaders to put their heads together to devise effective collaborative steps that may include, among other things, real time intelligence sharing and sharing of the list of terrorists and terrorist groups that are active in the region. There may also be the need to link up internationally to checkmate the ever-growing threat of terrorism.

The same tale about Hajj flights

Pilgrims need a break

HAJJ is one of the five pillars of Islam and a highly prized experience that Muslims look forward to at least once in a lifetime. Bangladesh has been one of the largest participants in the great congregation of brotherhood, fraternity and communion with Holy Kaaba.

Most of the intending Hajjis from Bangladesh belonging to the middle and upper middle classes, the government has to come forward and provide all kinds of assistance to them, so that their lifelong ambition is fulfilled.

Nothing can be more disparaging than their stumbling into the very first step of having to secure berth on a flight to the holy place. The problem about flight uncertainties is nothing new; in fact, it is an annual feature, only that it exacerbates with each passing year. Biman's limited capacity to operate Hajj flights is a well known fact. It simply doesn't have the fleet maneuverability for the purpose. Besides, Biman says it will be incurring a total loss of Tk.20 crore if it carries passengers at the government-approved rate of $950 per pilgrim. The foreign airlines are seemingly disinterested in the business 'at a low fare' of $950. The Civil Aviation Authority is not negotiating any higher rate with the foreign airlines. It seems that the problem will get resolved following the Prime Minster's return from Saudi Arabia.

Every effort should be made by all concerned agencies of the government and the assigned travel agencies to make absolutely fool-proof arrangements for the Hajj, including timely and comfortable travel by the intending pilgrims both under the government approved quota and the private one.

Damocle's sword still hangs on Iran!

M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

Iran has learnt in a bitter way from the war in neighbouring Iraq, that in the present milieu a nuclear bomb is perhaps the best safeguard for security. If Iraq really had a bomb the Anglo-US invasion of the country could perhaps be averted. Iran adhered to IAEA safeguard and international obligation in suspending her uranium enrichment programme in November last year. It was found futile from the way the negotiations were proceeding with EU-3 and IAEA. The programme has been resumed last month by Iran in a mood of defiance. It is yet to be seen how would it work.

THE West and the US in particular have been involved in a flurry of activities against Iran's nuclear programme which the latter asserts is meant for peaceful purposes to generate energy. As a part of it France, Britain and Germany called for an emergency meeting of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) to probe into Iran's nuclear affair and, if necessary, refer the case to the UNSC for possible imposition of sanctions. Clearly, the heat is against Iran which understandably walks a tight rope and has had plenty of explaining to do. While certain self-motivated think tanks holding sway over the media do not allow the country any respite and keep the world attention focussed on her it will be in order to analyse their attitude towards the Jewish state of Israel vis-a-vis her undeclared nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

Like India and Pakistan Israel is not a signatory to Nuclear Arms Proliferation Treaty and actively but clandestinely pursued its nuclear ambition while maintaining an ambiguity about its nuclear arsenal. It neither accepted nor denied the possession of nuclear weapons. However she had begun her quest to develop nuclear weapons since the country's inception in 1948. In 1956 France agreed to provide Israel an 18-Megawatt nuclear reactor that, after France's invasion of Suez alongside Britain and Israel in the same year, was upgraded to 24-Megawatt. The reactor provided by France was erected at Dimona in Neger desert and has remained functional to which Britain, the US and the IAEA are privy. Ever since Tel Aviv has pursued its nuclear programme for military purposes in a way that is an open secret.

Once a significant quantity of enriched uranium disappeared from an American reactor. Decades later it was discovered that it had landed in Israel. The arcane episode that could not have been possible without the connivance of American officials was never subjected to an enquiry -- one of the pointers to many such covert support that came from the West for Israel's nuclear build up.

Dimona still remains to be Israel's nuclear Shangri-La -- untouched by international inspection or safeguard. The IAEA chief quietly suggested not to look in that direction to stay out of trouble. It is not for nothing that the IAEA's Egyptian head was awarded out of all people coveted Nobel peace prize. Earlier he tried to be equivocal about Anglo-American claims about Iraq possessing WMD while Bush-Blair duo wanted an unequivocal chit from the IAEA. By quickly mending his ways with regard to Iraq's WMD and later successfully stage managing IAEA's crucial vote on 24 September El Baradei continues to be in the office of nuclear watch dog.

Although according to the American Federation of Scientists Israel had achieved nuclear capability by 1960 every year since then IAEA chose not to censure Israel in its annual meetings. Even this year as the IAEA's 139 members called for a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East the Oman-sponsored resolution seeking to condemn an Israeli nuclear threat to the region remained a non-started after the Israeli delegate manipulated to have the majority with him and got away with the remark that the Arab resolution was politically motivated. The kind of drama seen at the IAEA meeting is an annual exercise that does nothing to throw Israel's nuclear installations open to inspection and dismantle its nuclear arsenal.

Today Israel is known to possess nuclear weapons estimated between 200 and 400 of varying types ranging from suitcase bombs meant for restricted war zones to major devices of enormous lethality to cause an unparalleled holocaust. It is reckoned in some quarters that Israel qualifies to possess more nuclear weapons than Britain which is recognised nuclear state and signatory to the NPT. Yet neither the US nor the European Union has bothered to call Israel to account on this score. Instead both have rewarded Israel with military and economic aid as well as diplomatic support on the strength of which it refuses to vacate occupied West Bank and harbour expansionist desire for its so-called 'greater Israel'. Its hard line Likud government continues to expand Jewish settlement and there is no sign that it will implement the two state solution forward by international community. In the past also it sabotaged all peace plans because it knows it enjoys the US' unqualified backing.

When seen in the backdrop Israel's nuclear build up with the West's acquiscene, if not abutment and her continued swagger with regard to the Palestinian the IAEA's unusual alacrity to censure Iran with the former's heavy hand planted on Iran's nuclear installations would at once appear partisan and schisophrenic to say the least. Because Tehran has signed the NPT and insists it has a right to the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Yet American and European reaction has been hostile. It must however be said that the European three -- Britain, France and Germany -- have shown more patience and sophistication in their dealing with Iran. But for them, perhaps, Israel -- with the backing of America driven by her paranoia and paroxysm on Iran issue -- might have now struck at Iran's nuclear installation just as it destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981. At the same time both the US and EU-3's indifference to Israel's going nuclear and possessing bombs as early as nineties only speaks of their hypocrisy.

But Iran -- vulnerable as she is -- has learnt in a bitter way from the war in neighbouring Iraq, that in the present milieu a nuclear bomb is perhaps the best safeguard for security. If Iraq really had a bomb the Anglo-US invasion of the country could perhaps be averted. Iran adhered to IAEA safeguard and international obligation in suspending her uranium enrichment programme in November last year. It was found futile from the way the negotiations were proceeding with EU-3 and IAEA. The programme has been resumed last month by Iran in a mood of defiance. It is yet to be seen how would it work.

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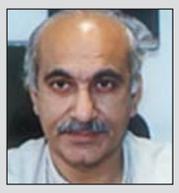
Who's lost it?



M.J. AKBAR

BYLINE

If there is a point then it is that the dust that was thrown up by the BJP's defeat has not yet settled down and as long as it does not, the ground will not be firm enough to seat a stable government in Delhi. After all, the only thing that was decided in the general elections of 2004 was who lost it. The BJP lost it. The jury is still out on who, a word that can absorb both the singular and the plural, is or are the victors.

RULE No. 1 to Rule No. 10 of a democracy: No one really wins an election, but someone loses it. There are of course exceptions, but the principle is sound. Did Tony Blair win the last British elections? Not if you see the percentages that voted for him. Did the Tories lose those elections? Certainly. A better candidate than John Kerry, who did not know his swift boat from his desert patrol, would have saved George Bush the humiliation of a second term. As it was, the first assessments on polling day in the United States last November predicted a Kerry victory. And then of course we have our own BJP, who compounded the mood-swing against the party after the Gujarat riots with persistent and even obstinate miscalculations.

One characteristic of Indian political parties, particularly when they are in power, makes them a unique phenomenon. They put their best foot forward, and then shoot themselves in that foot. Curiously they think they are still sprinting towards the finish line when it is apparent that they have begun to hobble. That describes the BJP last year. Is it an accurate description of Lalu Yadav in Bihar this year?

With polling over in more than half of Bihar, eyes are beginning to open and views expressed. The polls have made their point. They used to make a much bigger point, but after their disastrous distance from reality in the last Lok Sabha polls their impact has been discounted. The current preferred semi-scientific methodology for choosing winners and losers is body language. Television has made this a participative activity.

Purely on visual evidence, the sag is greater in Lalu Yadav's body language. This could be because of higher expectations. The last time, Lalu Yadav was contesting alone; this time he has Congress and CPI(M) as allies. In theory this should be enough to ensure victory. Around 50 seats were won and lost the last time by margins of one or two per cent. Lalu should retain those he won marginally, and gain those he lost. Between them the Congress and CPI(M) should have given him an additional ten per cent votes in a substantial number of constituencies. Then why worry?

Bihar is conducting elections in four phases. Exit polls in the second phase offered a curious statistic: it was the NDA, led by Nitish Kumar, that had increased its vote share by one per cent. What was more disturbing for Lalu was that his vote had dropped by eight per cent. One reason for this may have been accidental. The Election Commission chose, in its wisdom, to schedule polls during the middle of the month of fasting by Muslims. Enthusiasm needs to be pretty high to vote on a hungry stomach and thirsty throat under a sun still in summer mood. Any drop in the Muslim vote is a straight minus from Lalu's tally. But the bigger concern could be a consolidation of castes and voters who are committed against Lalu Yadav. Ram Vilas Paswan's support base has also weakened since the last election. Where have these voters shifted? If they have gone to Nitish Kumar and the NDA then they will become the largest bloc in the Assembly. If they have scattered among independents then the field remains open for carpet-baggers to open their carpets once the results are known in the last week of November.

Then there is the Sari Slide Rule. The origins of this phenomenon are well-known. Last year, the BJP attempted to purchase support in the then Prime Minister's constituency, Lucknow, by distributing free saris to poor women. Instead of generating votes, the BJP generated a stampede in which lives were lost. The saris turned to ash and the BJP slide accelerated.

The fact is that everyone tries to get away with what he can, but the excesses get caught. There is a kind of mathematical justice. This time in Bihar it is Lalu's side which is in trouble. We have had the extraordinary situation where the police are looking for a Union Cabinet minister because he entered a lock-up and simply lifted his brother out of jail. This is the Wild West with the benign sanction of Delhi. The reality is that everyone knows where this Union minister, Jaiprakash Narain Yadav, is but the police will not touch him because he is protected by the politically powerful. I was about to suggest this was scandalous, but that is too mild a word. What was this brother doing? He was caught with lakhs of rupees in largely 50-rupee notes, more than fifteen cases of liquor and a gun in his hand. Cash, liquor, gun: the Pirates of Bihar. What is amazing is the absence of outrage. Have we become immune to crime in Bihar?

Delhi is more interested in the consequences of the Bihar results than in the Bihar results. No one is really concerned about Bihar, its administration, or its welfare. Lalu's allies don't care, or they would not be with him, since he is responsible for the putrid mess in that state. Lalu's opponents pretend to care, but most of their politics is personal. They want to see Lalu out rather than Bihar improve.

The coalition in Delhi will be relieved if Lalu Yadav's wife Rabri Devi forms the government again. But if he loses?

Lalu Yadav then has two options. The sensible one is to cut his losses and save what he can from the wreck. He remains a significant player in Delhi and can use his railway ministry and Cabinet berth to fight back. He will no longer have the protection of the Bihar administration and therefore might find it difficult to return in a hurry; and there will certainly be a welter of accusations as evidence from years of malfeasance crawls out of the rot.

The second option is wrath. The target of such wrath will definitely be his Cabinet colleague Ram Vilas Paswan, who has effectively sabotaged Lalu Yadav by breaking the UPA model in Bihar. If Ram Vilas had not put up his slate of candidates, Lalu Yadav would be smiling his cherubic way back to power in Patna. Nitish Kumar and the NDA would have no chance whatsoever. Lalu could legitimately ask why Ram Vilas Paswan was a member of the national ruling alliance if he had helped their opponents come to power in as crucial a state as Bihar. This would link up with what Ram Vilas did with his MLAs in Bihar. It is unlikely that he will sit on any high moral platform and stay out of power. If he does, his MLAs will desert him for ministerships. If Lalu demands Paswan's ouster from the Cabinet, those hoping to stitch a Third Front from the crazy quilt of contemporary Indian politics will offer a cheer. The Congress, however, could throw in an elliptical suggestion of its own, by saying that Paswan should head a UPA government in Bihar thereby keeping the NDA out (I assume that no one will get a majority). The Congress would be more anxious to occupy space left behind by a retreating Lalu Yadav than any other party, because the revival of the Congress as a national force hinges around its resurrection in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

You get the point, don't you? It would be entirely understandable if you didn't, because logic is not the strong suit of personality-driven politics. If there is a point then it is that the dust that was thrown up by the BJP's defeat has not yet settled down and as long as it does not, the ground will not be firm enough to seat a stable government in Delhi. After all, the only thing that was decided in the general elections of 2004 was who lost it. The BJP lost it. The jury is still out on who, a word that can absorb both the singular and the plural, is or are the victors.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

SAARC needs greater enthusiasm

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

MATTERS AROUND US

It is not that SAARC is not dealing with the issues which are inextricably linked with the socio-economic improvement of the people of the region. But the identification of the problems and areas for concrete cooperation need to be more clearly assessed and follow-up actions taken without hesitation and delay. Islamabad summit took up a series of programmes in the economic, social and other sectors and all these are commendable. It is imperative that the positive spirit is maintained through appropriate and timely follow-up actions.

THE 13th summit of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is now hardly two weeks away and whatever little uncertainty that had earlier existed surrounding the event has disappeared. The twice postponed conference of the heads of the government is scheduled in Dhaka for November 12 and 13 and barring extreme unforeseen developments, the SAARC leaders will go into their much-awaited session on schedule.

They are expected to discuss issues pertaining to strengthening the seven-nation regional forum in the third decade of its existence. The summit is expected to take into account the progress made so far by the twenty-year-old organisation. But more importantly the summit will have to infuse new enthusiasm in the forum making its future more action-oriented so that the vast multitude living in the region can feel the relevance of the Association in a greater way.

The path of the SAARC over the last two decades has not been smooth and occasionally it was bumpy causing additional strains. This condition notwithstanding, the SAARC existed for the last twenty years because none of the member nations feels it irrelevant even though its progress during the period not being anything remarkable. Many, naturally, feel that its progress has been rather sluggish. But its existence in itself can be seen as a positive development given the fact that the forum had come up belying many skepticism and is continuing with modest achievements despite certain problems. In the meantime it is also gaining greater acceptance at various quarters.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) a few months ago finally accepted this regional forum as an observer in the world body. It has been a shot in the arms for the forum and the decision gives SAARC a distinct advantage for interactions with the UN system. No doubt, for the SAARC it has come little late but the bottom line is that the recognition has been given. Evidently, the UN closely monitored the SAARC and finally reached the conclusion that it was sparing no efforts to develop effective cooperative mechanism among seven nations in the most densely populated region of the world.

Clearly, the forum is handicapped by certain problems like resource constraint and political differences that seek to retard its progress. Nevertheless, many see in its great potentials which definitely have not been exploited.

True, the SAARC has often been a victim of political problems that undeniably exist in South Asia, an area congenitally known for this milieu. Postponements and deferment of the summits are not new phenomenon. Still, the staging of the summit itself is something to cheer about. Differences have bedevilled the SAARC to some extent, but what is praiseworthy is that the setbacks have always been temporary and the forum reverted to original track. That is where the strength of the forum lies although it is desirable that the SAARC cycle -- particularly the summits are held on a regular basis as provided by the charter. Pakistan and India, two key players of the South Asian spectrum have agreed to attend the 13th summit in Dhaka despite the fact that both countries have been badly hit by a catastrophic earthquake. The spirit is simply commendable. Pakistan is still reeling under the devastation which is far larger than India's.

The charter provides for a summit once in a year since this should not be difficult as members come from one region and their number is not large. Commonwealth leaders meet (CHOGM) once in two years, Nonaligned and Islamic countries once in three years. All these groups have big number of members who come from different continents, whereas seven SAARC members are neighbours. Hence the decision for annual conference of the leaders was rational as this should also provide the members to have talks at highest level for overall welfare of the region. Sadly, this vision did not work for the forum as annual summit remains a problem even though it was one of the basic intentions of the SAARC. Consequently, the forum suffered in the absence of meetings of their leaders at regular intervals.

Arguably, the SAARC secretariat in Kathmandu functions effectively and meetings at other levels are useful, but consultations by the leaders are imperative for the development of the organisation, which is afflicted by manifold problems mainly stemming from political differences. After all, it is the summit that effectively helps clear the hindrances that scuttle the expected growth of the forum.

Bangladesh has particular reason to be anxious about the SAARC as this country mooted the idea. When Bangladesh conceived the South Asian forum, the proposal was greeted with a large degree of skepticism in certain circles and major nations in the region even dragged their feet in endorsing the concept. But once it took off following assiduously built painstaking efforts, SAARC did not look back the slow progress notwithstanding.

The summits should not be subjected to delay as failure to hold the event in time spawns mistrust and doubts about the effectiveness of the forum. Contacts among the leaders leave a sobering effect as evidenced by the current phase of reconciliation between India and Pakistan that had begun with a meeting of their leaders on the sidelines of the 12th summit in Islamabad.

It is not that SAARC is not dealing with the issues which are inextricably linked with the socio-economic improvement of the people of the region. But the identification of the problems and areas for concrete cooperation need to be more clearly assessed and follow-up actions taken without hesitation and delay. Islamabad summit took up a series of programmes in the economic, social and other sectors and all these are commendable. It is imperative that the positive spirit is maintained through appropriate and timely follow-up actions.

For resources and technical and other assistance, the SAARC in the new phase should develop greater interactions with international organisation and agencies for effectively helping its programmes. For instance, the inter-governmental body with its headquarters in Dhaka covering a larger region -- the CIRDAP -- can also be approached by the SAARC for collaborative programmes. The CIRDAP recently held a ministerial meeting of its 14 member states from Asia and the Pacific region in Dhaka where rural development and poverty alleviation was the main topic of discussion. One of the main objectives of the SAARC is also the same issue. Interactions will help achieve the goals. SAARC can also develop ties with the ASEAN and other regional forums for experiences and cooperation.

Member nations should also demonstrate greater willingness for accommodation of others' views as far as possible in matters where interests may conflict. For instance, the SAFTA is to come into force from beginning of the next year but the progress made so far with complex negotiations on the matter is not very encouraging to the extent that it may not be implemented from the scheduled time. However, as the leaders are set to meet for the summit in the Bangladesh capital soon, they need to inject new elements of hope in the SAARC to turn the forum into a more vibrant and dynamic one. Hopefully, the leaders will not disappoint those who remain admirers of the SAARC.

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