

Eid holiday inertia

The sooner we restart work, the better

As it happens annually, there have been some unfortunate fatalities during Eid vacation this year as well. There was Foy's Lake merry-go-round accident in Chittagong that took a toll of two lives and left a few others injured. Already, some road mishaps have occurred, and with the bulk of post-Ramadan mobility yet to be seen, apprehensions arise of more mishaps calling for adequate precautions to ward these off. Any death diminishes us, but an accidental one, that too in the midst of festivities, makes the loss of life poignantly saddening.

There was also the sad note to this year's Eid celebrations in parts of the northern region of the country where some twenty lakh 'monga' affected people suffering from seasonal joblessness saw the sun rising and setting on the day like any other day.

Having said that, we turn to the tremendous bonding that is forged between rural and urban Bangladesh during the Eid holidays. After family reunions in their village homes, the employed work force is only expected to return to their places of work with their battery recharged and ready to move their engines of work-life.

So, after the Eid fiesta, they must get back to work rhythm thick and fast. However, with hardly a day after the Eid holidays, we have another closed day today. The extended holidays will have to be made up for, and that too as quickly as possible, since the political temperature is likely to rise following the SAARC Summit.

With the celebrations over, the other critical issue that the administration should direct its attention to, is the continued spate of spiraling of prices. The government needs to work towards stabilising the market prices shooting up during Ramadan, including the transportation fares that went haywire in the prelude to Eid vacation. We suggest that it may be worthwhile for the government to analyse as to what went wrong with the supply side of the market, so that we can at least try and avert repetition of the sorry state of affairs so sordidly experienced this year.

Explosives in courier parcel

Dreadful ingenuity gives rise to new concerns

THE seizure of powerful explosive materials that were sent to Rajshahi from Sylhet by courier is a highly welcome piece of news. That the authorities in Sylhet were able to tip off the police in Rajshahi, and as a result, one kilo of RDX explosives, 500 grams of ammonia, and 500 grams of sulphur, enough to manufacture several hundred powerful bombs, were intercepted and rendered harmless are testimony to an intelligence success that we were stressing the need for.

Nevertheless, the bad news is that neither the recipient nor the sender has been apprehended (although the manager and two employees of the courier service have been arrested on minor charges). Additionally, the fact that the explosives were sent by parcel and well hidden hints at a growing sophistication on the part of the terrorists. Finally, the fact that the parcel was sent from Sylhet to Rajshahi is troubling, as once again it underlines the nationwide reach of the terrorists.

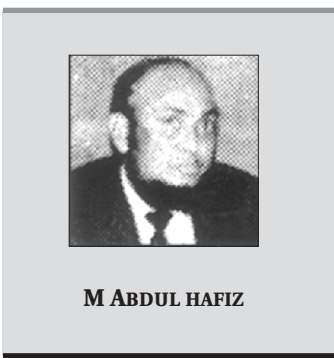
It seems to us that if terrorists are now using courier services to send explosives from one part of the country to another, then the courier service people themselves need to seriously think about adopting some safety measures, both for their own sake, and that of the nation as a whole.

The courier service industry has grown and done well over the last few years. However, there is no reason why it cannot add simple routine precautions to its handling of packages similar to measures in place elsewhere in the world.

Use of metal detectors and perhaps even trained dogs to detect explosives or other contraband would be a good place to start. In addition, it is clear that the employees must receive training in how to identify suspicious packages. Finally, there should be more stringent confirmation of the identity of both sender and recipient before a parcel is sent out, unlike the present case, pursuant to which neither party can now be located.

These simple steps should not harm the industry, but they will do a lot to mitigate the risk to the nation as well as to the courier service itself. After all, one presumes that the courier services themselves have the greatest desire to ensure that such materials do not pass through their hands.

America's anti-terror failures: Looking for scapegoat?



IN the aftermath of nine-eleven four years ago Pakistan vied to be on the side of the United States in its war on terror and become the latter's frontline state when she invaded Afghanistan a month later obviously to crush the al-Qaeda terrorist network and apprehend Osama bin Laden -- thought to be its guru and the mastermind behind the terrorist attack in the US a month earlier -- dead or alive. Making a sharp U-turn in its pro-Taliban Afghan policy the country went whole hog to ride the West's anti-terror band wagon and took active part in the US' military campaign in Afghanistan.

Even if the US immensely benefited from the cooperation of Pakistan and the latter was adequately bestowed with favour and largesses, presently both suffer from a measure of disappointment which many thought was inevitable because of incompatibility of their alliance. Although Pakistan

was given the status of the US' non-Nato ally the spirit behind their interaction was never more than that of client-patron relationship. Pakistan remained on the US' payroll of sorts for the services rendered by her during the war in Afghanistan which is still hardly over. It went on fine notwithstanding reservations on either side.

Now there seems to be some crisis of credibility with the both. There is an

the part of a strategic withdrawal. The vast swathe of Afghanistan still remains outside Karzai's writ or American control. The very intensity of the US' charges against Pakistan that it is not doing enough to seal the border or deal with the Taliban/al-Qaeda elements points to the US' continued trouble in Afghanistan.

So, the Talibans are not defeated; neither bin Laden has lost the war. He

stability return for America's eventual exit. There is obviously temptation on the US' part to find a scapegoat and none is more readily available than Pakistan. Therefore the pressure is mounting on Pakistan to do more or take the blame -- both from the US and Karzai government.

A day before the recent Musharraf-Rice meeting The New York Times ran a cover story in its magazine detailing

own troops, handing over numerous suspects to the US, withstanding the virulent criticism of its own people and on the top of all compromising a bit of its sovereignty in the process. Yet, Pakistan is told she is not doing enough! The perplexed authority in Pakistan look askance if the whole exercise was of no consequence with regard to its equation with the United States.

Camp David by President Bush -- an honour for any third world leader.

But when their president settled with his US counterpart for what many Pakistanis considered "peanuts" -- a \$3bn aid package which is overtied, largely conditional and of a time span of 5 years -- it was a total disappointment. Even according to CENCOM data, Pakistan economy suffered as a consequence of US' operations in Afghanistan the loss of over \$10bn. Although critics argued that their president undersold the country Musharraf's gain was immense in terms of its legitimacy at home.

Now tired of the US' constant refrain that Pakistan is not doing enough and an implied pressure to do more Musharraf has apparently jittered on the issue and come out with quixotic plan of fencing Pakistan's border with Afghanistan to stop once for all the cross border infiltration. But doubts abound as to its feasibility and effectiveness. But it is clear that the president's is an offer in desperation. He too knows that the proposition is impracticable.

PERSPECTIVES

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impression of Pakistan thinking that she did too much for too little which the US, frustrated over its failed wars both in Iraq and Afghanistan is seized with the paranoia if Pakistan was not doing enough particularly in Afghanistan where from the trap of Tora Bora hills Osama was last seen escaping on a horse back during Nov-Dec of 2001. The Americans are still convinced that he slipped into Pakistan's tribal belt across the border. In retrospect, the Talibans were not defeated in Afghanistan, nor quite destroyed. Before the superior forces they only vacated their strongholds as

is pretty much fighting it on his term. The West's Iraq invasion seemed to be a boon for the Ladenites because they got the Americans where they wanted them to be: in a deep quagmire. Far from reducing Islamic militancy Iraq has fuelled it bringing more recruits to Laden's cause. They would welcome another American faux pas in Iran to carry further forward their mission.

Consequently, now on an epic scale the entire region from Iraq to Afghanistan to Western borderlands of Pakistan is in turmoil. And none, least of all the Pentagon or CIA has the slightest clue of how will this end and

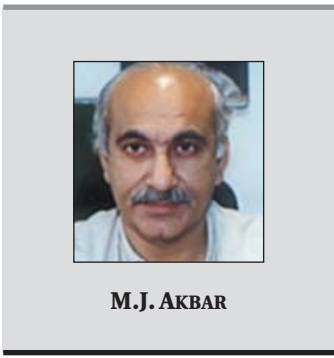
bin Laden's escape from Tora Bora hills. The story quotes Gary Schroen, a former CIA official, as saying "we are never going to get bin Laden without the total cooperation of Pakistan and there is a lot they can do. It's all up to Pakistanis now." This clearly implies that Pakistan is not doing its utmost either to crush al-Qaeda or apprehend bin Laden.

This is in spite of Pakistan deploying 70,000 troops along the Afghan border, arresting or killing 600 terrorists during its operations in Waziristan, alienating its tribal people, accepting casualties from among its

Pakistan meticulously followed the US' anti-terror script -- hunting down fleeing and hiding Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives, handing over terrorist suspects to the US authority and allowing US Marines and FBI agents to walk in and out of the country with impunity. Musharraf took high-risk steps to bring under leash the country's volatile bands of clerics, to silence anti-American voice and succeeded in maintaining an upward trend in once-troubled US-Pakistan relations at the peak of which Musharraf was summoned to Mount

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

Pure evil



HERE has to be a reason, even for pure evil; otherwise it is lunacy. We must never confuse evil with lunacy. To say that Hitler was mad is, in a sense, to absolve him, because you eliminate his responsibility for his crimes. Lunacy may extract a grievous price on occasion, but it is an accident -- an accident of the brain that destroys the capability of judgment, moral and amoral, whether it is a matter of sifting right from wrong or separating fact from fiction. Evil is a deliberate, often carefully calibrated choice. We must understand lunacy in order to isolate it, and we must understand evil in order to punish it. We have to live with the depressing fact that neither can be eliminated.

Evil can take both a collective as well as an individual form. There are times when substantial majorities of a population become collectively evil, and remain so for hundreds of years if not thousands. There was the spasm of Nazism in Germany, a virulent strain of evil that is unparalleled in human history. Other forms were less destructive perhaps, but hardly less corrosive or forgivable. Racism, for instance.

Americans are mourning the death, and celebrating the life, of Rosa Parks, who became the pivot of a turning point in American history

when she refused to give up her seat in a bus to a white man in a small town. The pastor of a black church in that town was drafted to head the non-violent resistance movement when she was arrested. His name was Martin Luther King, and he led black Americans to emancipation after hundreds of years of the most inhuman slavery. Apartheid in South Africa took even longer to destroy. Lest we Indians begin to feel smug, the fate of Untouchables in our country was

barbaric, senseless terrorist bombs on the eve of Diwali in Delhi? The checklist is obvious, if often unstated in respectable media for reasons of delicacy.

At the top of the list is surely the bleeding wound of the subcontinent, the problems of Kashmir. Was this an act of revenge? But if it was revenge then it should have been targeted against a symbol of government, not against a marketplace. The purpose seems more mischievous.

BYLINE

We do not know how long terrorism will enter our homes and our markets and our streets, and we do not know when the last battle will be fought. But we do know that this is not a war with set-piece battles; that this is a process in which victory and defeat will be determined in the mind much more than the street. The mind is controlled by the nerve, and democracy has given India nerves of steel. That admittedly flabby flesh you see on the outside is the weakness of a sweet tooth; the other teeth can bite back.

worse than the lot of slaves in America or blacks in South Africa. Dalits had to carry a pitcher around their neck so that their spit would not pollute the ground. When you think about some of these facts, all you can do is shudder, for our forefathers who practiced such evil, or condoned it, considered themselves civilised. By the 1960s and 1970s the world changed sufficiently to outlaw such practices, not just in word but also in practice.

Terrorism, the contemporary evil, is not collective; it is the work of individuals or very small groups operating through cells. Terrorists are faceless because they are ready for personal obliteration -- hence the faint paradox of an identikit hunt. The normalcy of the men who planted bombs in crowded marketplaces is their weapon, making them all the more sinister.

What were the reasons behind the

Was it an attempt to provoke communal violence between Hindus and Muslims? The moment for this barbarism was the eve of Diwali, the happiest day on the calendar of Hindu festivals. To spread carnage on such an occasion is to incite the mildest of human beings to rage. It is evidence of the growing maturity of inter-community relations in India that there was no such reaction. This is not the first time that such embers have been fanned in the hope of a larger conflagration. But apart from the unforgivable post-assassination riots of 1984, the fallout of the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992, and the more recent, gruesome Gujarat riots under the watch of chief minister Narendra Modi, the people of India have met such challenges with commendable calm.

Did the anonymous killers hope to derail the peace process between

lishment was concerned, the message to Delhi was reassuring.

President Pervez Musharraf seemed sincere in his private conversation with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and, more important, his public pronouncements. He offered "unequivocal" support to India in any investigation and added "Pakistan stands with India on this act of terrorism." We will wait to find out whether this offer of support means anything or not, but it is reasonable to assume that Dr Singh was comforted by what he heard, or there would have been public ramifications. Privately, India and Pakistan believe that terrorists, who feel increasingly abandoned as peace initiatives strengthen, will express their desperation through mindless, destructive terrorism. Their targets will be both innocents and VIPs.

It is now two decades since the

builds very strong underground roots, because it is always nourished by the will of the people. People have direct ownership of the state; the vote makes them shareholders in the power process; they elect and destroy the executive. Patriotism is common to all nations; democracy strengthens the stake in a nation's present and future. The strength of India is much more than the strength of its armies, for it derives from the strength of its people. Since the vote is equal, all communities, with time, discover that their stake matters, and that their will can change the nature of governments.

Military strategists have looked wistfully at the geography of India, and the strategic depth that this provides. Basically this means that India's defence forces have space to manoeuvre, to take a second stand in the event of any setback. But that is an advantage only in a conventional war.

The real war today is unconventional, for the nameless, faceless terrorist can strike anywhere and melt into anonymity. A nation needs a different kind of strategic depth to fight this war successfully. It requires depth of character, and an extraordinary resilience to sustain perspective and balance. Delhi did not grieve any less on the day after the pre-Diwali havoc, but the manner in which the city recovered could not have escaped the attention of those trying to destroy its peace. Only the very cynical, or the very prejudiced, would consider this a sign of indifference. The simple message from the city was that it would not be defeated.

The Indian voter's faith in its politicians has collapsed. Its faith in many institutions is dangerously low. But this is more than offset by the Indian's faith in the country's economy and the nation's polity. The view is gaining ground that the politician cannot do much to harm the economy, and the polity is stronger than the politician. This is what makes India much stronger than the sum of its parts and gives it the ability to absorb wounds in order to protect the whole. It will take much more than a few bombs in Delhi to hurt India.

We do not know how long terrorism will enter our homes and our markets and our streets, and we do not know when the last battle will be fought. But we do know that this is not a war with set-piece battles; that this is a process in which victory and defeat will be determined in the mind much more than the street. The mind is controlled by the nerve, and democracy has given India nerves of steel. That admittedly flabby flesh you see on the outside is the weakness of a sweet tooth; the other teeth can bite back.

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OPINION

Has the government lost touch with people?

ABDUL HANNAN

IF the Press reaction to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's 10 October Radio and Television speech to the nation is any indication, she may have lost touch with people and is living in a world of virtual reality and fond illusions, surrounded by sycophants and courtiers feeding her with assumed success stories of her administration. The reaction of the Press to her speech has been generally one of shock, disbelief and dismay, and little of appreciation for anything other than eradication of polythene bags and polluting auto rickshaws. The newspaper editorials and comments anatomised and dissected the speech to bring the skeleton out of the cupboard and raised a groundswell of criticism what was described as a litany of carelessness, complacency and lies, hypocrisy and arrogance of a non-performing BNP led coalition government. It is imperative that his speech writers and spin doctors have the temerity to feed back the prime minister about this reaction so that she can make amends for the past and recover and salvage the lost ground of goodwill and trust of the people during the rest of the tenure of

Administration.

While disapproving of opposition tactic of boycott of the parliament and giving ultimatums to oust the elected government, the issues the press took up with the prime minister's speech for severe criticism were a dysfunctional parliament hamstrung by political intolerance and repression of the opposition; insensitivity to criticism about an inordinately large and expensive cabinet, disabuse of the institution of the caretaker government by the 14th constitutional amendment providing for extension of retirement age of judges by two years to manipulate appointment of immediate past chief justice KM Hasan, loyal to BNP, as the chief adviser of the caretaker government; appointment of chief election commissioner with alleged background of BNP credentials and recruitment of BNP cadre activists as election officers to frustrate free and fair election; soft peddling the implementation of election pledge for the separation of judiciary from the executive, as a political ploy and leverage to bend the law to control and persecute the opposition in spite of Supreme Court directives and 12 extensions of time.

The abuse of authority and the miscarriage of justice are displayed by presidential clemency to a BNP sympathiser convicted to death sentence for double murder; release of Moofit Hannan, convicted to life sentence for planting bomb at Kotalipara allegedly to kill Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina; 'cross fire' extra judicial killings of criminals by Rab and the police encounter and human rights violation; decline of law and order and grenade and serial bomb attacks killing scores of men and women including Ivy Rahman, SAMS Kibria and Ahsanullah Master; persecution of minorities including the Ahmadya community; failure to implement independent human rights commission; sleeze, graft and corruption involved in government purchases and tenders by 'alternative centre of power', ruling party law makers, bureaucrats, and also government ministers.

A disabled Independent Anti Corruption Commission stymied and stonewalled by non-cooperation from the government itself; politicisation of administration and every layer of society by appointments, promotions and postings regardless of merit and

competence, dangerously dividing and polarising the nation; undermining the integrity of the High Court by appointing judges on political consideration allegedly without adequate qualification; fragile economy and price rise of essential commodities due to unbridled profiteering by dishonest hoarders and businessmen and also ruling party toll collectors; unabated violence on women and indirect election to 45 reserved seats of women in the parliament contrary to demands for direct election by feminist advocates; indulgence in tacit patronage to militant Islamic extremists perhaps under implicit pressure from coalition partners giving rise to a spectre of grave insecurity and uncertainty in the country and a lackluster and lackadaisical foreign policy without direction, purpose and results do not give any credit to the administration.

If press is the reflection of public opinion, these indeed are disturbing concerns, shared not only by the people but also echoed by grassroots level BNP workers manifest in the meeting held in Dhaka recently. Government will do well to remember that its small indiscretions and impro-

priety of public morality add up to incremental diminution of its credibility. It is pointless to blame press for propagating the image of the country. Propaganda and publicity of government's achievements are no substitute for programme delivery and performance. It is foolish to shift the blame and imagine the whole world as our enemy, if the international press, human rights and other agencies describe Bangladesh as a haven of Islamic terrorists, as the most corrupt country, as one of the worst places for safety of journalists. It is we who are to blame. When the so-called Tuesday Group, the EU and the World Bank hold meetings in Dhaka, Brussels and Washington and pass resolutions to express concern about the failure of governance in Bangladesh, it is we who are to blame. The government cannot shirk its responsibility but must do some soul searching to see if the criticisms merit attention.

Yet, this is not what people expected from the BNP when they voted it to power. When people rejected Awami League and gave decisive victory to BNP with a massive mandate they wanted to see it perform better to improve the quality and

condition of their lives in peace, harmony and happiness. It is unfortunate the government frittered the opportunity away with little sense of accountability and responsibility to the people and society. The government has become increasingly remote and alienated from the people who feel betrayed. There is a deep disenchantment and frustration in their mind.

People are bitter that the government in deference to its coalition partners has unwittingly thrown the country into the grip of Islamic terrorists. People are angry at the prevarication and confusion of messages of prime minister in failing to identify clearly the self-confessed JMJB, JMB and Harkatul Zihad terrorist detainees as the authors of grenade and serial bombings in the country and are critical of prime minister's innuendoes implicit in the remark 'whatever clothing they may wear, it is not difficult for Bangladeshi people to comprehend the motives and the instigators behind them,' implicating the Opposition Awami League, a familiar gimmick to divert the attention of people. People also dismiss Jamaat leader and Industries Minister Matuir

Rahman Nizami's accusation of RAW involvement as absurd and highly motivated. The arrests have revealed that more than forty percent terrorist detainees are linked to Jamaat. It is high time the government got rid of the albatross in its neck, to redeem its legitimacy and deal with the menace of terrorists in the country.

The other challenge before the government is grinding poverty and economic hardship, misery and sufferings which stares the vast poor multitude in the face. Under the so-called globalised neo-liberal free market economy foisted by the West, insatiable greed and unabashed consumerism, the poor have been remorselessly pushed deeper and deeper in destitution and despair, exclusion and indignity and the rich have become filthy rich. Prime minister's remarks about the rise of purchasing power of people and modern supermarkets and apartment complexes 'built with cement, steel and glass' as a sign of economic growth and development are an affront to the intelligence of people. The remark is a mockery to Deepali of Kishoreganj, Halima of Nischintipur village in Jessore and Nabakumar Roy of

Nilphamari who committed suicide because of starvation. The talk of rise of purchasing power of people does not mean anything to Monga affected famished people of Kurigram in north Bengal, haunted by fear of starvation, trekking to the city in quest of illusive jobs, food and shelter.

It seems the Prime Minister is simply kept out of touch with reality. This is dangerous for a popularly elected leader with a huge majority in the parliament. Her speech writers must be disingenuous not to know that the so-called GDP growth and development, which is highly skewed in favour of the five percent privileged few in the society, is devoid of distributive justice and is beyond the pale of the teeming million who stand and stare without access at the display of wealth and affluence at the expense of their criminal exploitation and denial. Yet this class of forgotten silent majority who are vitally important in determining the fate of election results never made mistakes in their audit of performance of their leaders in the past.

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