

A menacing agenda bares teeth again

No time for lip-service

No sooner had the fanfare of the 13th Saarc summit subsided than the government has received a stark reminder of the serious security problems that the country is facing.

As always, our hearts and prayers go out to the families of the victims, and we call on the government to leave no stone unturned in its efforts to bring the perpetrators of such a senseless act of terror to justice.

This tragedy serves to underscore that the security situation in the country is very far from under control and that terrorists remain not only at large but sufficiently emboldened and organised as to be able to carry out such attacks.

It should be noted that one peculiarity of many of the terrorist attacks that Bangladesh has suffered is that they have targeted judges and the legal apparatus.

In Bangladesh, while we have had no shortage of such attacks, these have also come hand in hand with attacks aimed specifically at the judiciary.

This latest atrocity points to the viciousness of their agenda and the callousness with which they can take innocent lives.

The terrorists must be fought with all we have. There can be no peaceful co-existence with them.

Afghanistan, China and Japan welcomed

More depth to Saarc

We welcome the decision to accord full membership of Saarc to Afghanistan as well as that for giving China and Japan observer status, after finalisation of modalities in this respect.

As for China, even without elaborating it one can guess the sensibilities of the two major players in Saarc on the proposition, and credit goes to Bangladesh diplomacy for making the package palatable to both parties by the inclusion of Japan for the observer status in the same breath.

The inclusion of Afghanistan as a member of Saarc, in principle, is a due recognition of the cultural and historical ties, as mentioned by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, that the country shares with the region.

The expansion of Saarc has to be seen as more than a routine exercise. The strength of any such grouping often lies in diversity. Saarc is rightly looking beyond the frontiers of South Asia to work with countries that are important for very substantial reasons.

Eid in the time of monga



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE festival of Eid is over, bringing, however, no festivity to the bulk of our population. It couldn't be otherwise in this country of many contradictions.

Understandably, the Eid festivities remained out of reach for the monga-hit people of the vast swathe of northern districts. Even in the rest of the country, Eid was an exclusive affair for the affluent few, and shorn of its universality.

As the poor, the deprived, and the

underprivileged, already lashed by the unaffordable prices of essentials, went through the agony of hunger, even during the day of Eid (as widely reported in the news media), particularly in monga-hit areas, the privileged few gave way to reckless consumerism, ostentation, and wastage.

Tonically, it all began with the month of holy Ramadan. Supposed to

Eid, because this hunger and poverty and the tribulations that go with them are permanent features of their life -- thanks to the kind of politics pushed in this country.

Haven't you seen the glittering shopping malls stacked with designer brand and lehengas with fantastic price tag? Who can consume them in a country where fifty per cent of the

for grabs. It seems it has already been grabbed by a caucus comprising pseudo-politicians, the top brass of bureaucracy, and freshly emerged class of industrialists and businessmen, who make up the country's de facto ruling elite, of course, with the blessings of international financial institutions.

and consumption -- Oriented hedonism. We seem to have been swept away by these forces after having lost our moorings and with no recovery in sight.

In the meantime, the Pied Pipers of Bangladesh politics easily win over the voters at election time with their mesmerizing tunes and syrupy promises. Once catapulted to power, they

PERSPECTIVES
It must be realized that ours is a society which is only good enough for routine and not for a festival of Eid. How can there be a festival in a country of the dirt poor, the squalid squatter, the slum dweller and the destitute, living literally on scraps, without being accounted for and with no defined occupation.

be the month for restraint to acquire the higher values of life, the fasting was awkwardly accompanied by feasting in the name of Iftar which was celebrated more like a neo socio-cultural event.

Ramadan fasting and hunger were at times indistinguishable for the monga-hit people. But the perpetuity of monga could hardly be broken by

population live under the poverty line? So there has to be arrangements of piling up money in a few hands through patronization, political favour or largesse, and even sheer graft -- suitably covered with legality of sorts -- so that the designer brand lehengas worth over one lakh taka can be disposed off.

Bangladesh has long since been up

ingenuity, conformist disposition, and right connections, you can always stake a share in the ever-shrinking pie.

It is difficult to break the stranglehold. The predators have already unleashed the brute force of avarice, exhibitionism, arrogance, wastage,

give a damn to the ordinary folk and abandon them. They are left in the lurch for their folly and forced to endure the mediocrity of the former's governance.

There is no way of coming out of the cycle in the merry-go-round kind of politics of this country. Everybody takes his turn and stands a chance in

Curing the French malady



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

THE unprecedented urban violence witnessed in France has provoked a strong official response, including the declaration of a state of emergency and curfews in Paris and 30 other cities.

What started as a "local problem" in Paris has acquired continental dimensions. The rioting spread to Berlin, Brussels and Rome -- highlighting the fact that similar, if less intense, disaffection exists all over Western Europe.

I was briefly in Paris during the unrest. What struck me was both the strength of the shock the rioting produced, and the concerns it generated among the thinking public about national identity, cultural diversity, and democracy in France.

The immediate cause of the rioting in Clichy-sous-Bois, a Paris suburb,

was the "war without mercy" on suburban violence declared on October 19 by France's Hard-Right Home Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. Following this, the police tightened identity checks.

In Clichy-sous-Bois, two terrified North African youths, who thought they were being chased by the police, hid in an electrical sub-station and got electrocuted.

A North African name often invites

rejection on the job market. A study found last year that a man with a typical French name applying for 100 jobs will get 75 interview calls.

This exclusion has been called the collapse of the "social escalator." It's compounded by the terribly fraught state-of-low-cost housing estates called HLM, in which the minorities typically live, which are ghettos full of frustrated

young men with no future.

At stake is not just the fate of Western Europe's minorities, including 12 million Muslims, but the future of pluralist societies everywhere, which are based on multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious identities. Today's world is based upon greater interaction between different ethnic groups, with respect for diversity and its intrinsic value.

protestors "scum" who must be crushed.

At the root of the violence is exclusion, frustration and hopelessness among the minorities, in particular those from the Maghreb -- North African countries like Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

Over the past decade, says sociologist Alain Touraine, the minorities' isolation has worsened and produced ghettoisation. Since September 11, they face even greater suspicion, discrimination and abuse.

A North African name often invites

In France, exclusion is further aggravated by a centralised police, which typically excludes the non-ethnic French. There's no community-based "friendly" policing either -- unlike, say, in Germany or Britain.

"All this is a recipe for frustration and desperation," argues Ms Susan George, the eminent writer-activist, and my colleague at the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam.

HLMs are sites of poverty, frustration, denied opportunities, injustices -

taken sides against the North Africans. This expresses their racist bias and the Right's success in dividing the immigrant community along regional and ethnic lines.

France presents a picture of political strife, economic stagnation and severe cutbacks in social spending. But France's worst problem lies in its "Republican model of integration" which holds that everyone is indistinguishable in the eyes of the state.

This might sound like a lofty principle. But it's not. It suppresses cultural differences and recognises only one notion of Frenchness. France, with its

60 million people, 5 million of whom are Muslim, ought to welcome different, multiple notions of identity and Frenchness -- in language, custom, dress, cuisine, and religion. It should be relaxed and multicultural.

Here lies France's greatest failure, according to leading sociologists like Touraine. Refusal to recognise ethnic-cultural diversity imposes an artificial uniformity upon society.

- when they face discrimination on that very count.

France recently banned the wearing in schools of head-scarves or any other symbols of religious belief. This drew protests from Muslims, Sikhs and other minorities, and created strife in place of accord.

France's second great failure is its rejection of affirmative action for the underprivileged --something that societies as diverse as India and the US practise. This means the disadvantaged in France don't enjoy equal

this game of musical chairs. Some resort to election engineering -- a terminology we now come across. There is also something called social engineering to restructure the society to make it workable.

It must be realized that ours is a society which is only good enough for routine and not for a festival of Eid. How can there be a festival in a country of the dirt poor, the squalid squatter, the slum dweller and the destitute, living literally on scraps, without being accounted for and with no defined occupation.

Purposeless poverty alleviation exercises conducted in cozy meeting rooms by the "experts" on the subject might have brought accolades to themselves but no succor to the poverty-stricken. Poverty alleviation is more a matter of arithmetic, a package of actions to be carried forward as a strategy for nation-building which encompasses the granting of space in the society for the millions now unaccounted for.

Only then can an Eid festival based on its universality perhaps be considered. It is a long haul, and whether or when any political dispensation of this country will undertake that task, of course, another debate.

Brig (red) Hafiz is former DG of BISIS.

In the name of alleviating poverty ...

AMIRAH ISLAM

ON November 11 most of us were forced to stay in our homes. Many major roads around Dhaka city were off-limits for the next three days.

Saarc was also formally launched in Dhaka on December 8, 1985, aiming to promote peace, stability, amity, and progress. From this, we understand that Dhaka is a leader, or at least wants to be a leader, as far as regional cooperation is concerned.

One main piece of this year's 13th Saarc Summit is to find ways to alleviate poverty from our collective countries. As pointed out by Foreign Minister Morshed Khan, the 13th Saarc Summit will deliberate on how to inject impetus into poverty alleviation.

Professor Yunus has hailed the idea of creating a South Asia Poverty Fund.

It would seem that poverty alleviation is the current buzz-word and that we are all fired up to get rid of poverty! In the midst of all this, we need to ask some baseline questions.

Saarc is being hosted by Bangladesh.

As an example, let us take a closer look at what happened during the days of the summit in the city centre.

Dhaka city's wholesale hub -- Kawran Bazar was shut down. On November 9, The Daily Star reported that: "Wholesale markets have already stopped their businesses and have started leaving the city as the authorities have ordered a four-day

shutdown of markets from the 10th onwards, for security of the Saarc Summit."

Besides the kitchen supplies market, Kawran Bazar houses the biggest wholesale fish and vegetable markets. There are separate markets for rice, cloth, electronic goods, wood, hardware, household appliances, and poultry.

Such a shutdown does not even take place during hartals. It is estimated that these markets operate at almost 60 percent of their efficiency during hartal hours. So in the name of poverty alleviation are we actually alleviating poverty? Could the Saarc security not have been better planned, so as not to deprive people of their basic rights?

tion is: how will these hand-to-mouth daily workers survive? It is for sure they will have to survive by hook or by crook. Over the minimum shut down period of four days, each will lose Tk.200 plus the opportunity to buy/get lunch each day.

Let us look at how the authorities view this deprivation. Again quoting from The Daily Star: "A high official of the revenue department of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) said the closure will not have much of an impact!!!"

mouth workers the opportunity of earning for their daily food a total of Tk.40 lakhs (5,000 x 800) and an opportunity to feed themselves.

Let us look at how the authorities view this deprivation. Again quoting from The Daily Star: "A high official of the revenue department of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) said the closure will not have much of an impact!!!"

politan Police (DMP) said: "All of us should sacrifice for the sake of security and the greater interest of the country!!!"

Let us examine the impact and nature of sacrifice. In addition to the daily labourers, imagine what will happen to the connected stakeholder chain, restaurants, and families who buy from the market, retail markets

who buy from the market, suppliers who supply the wholesale market, and fresh food in the pipeline waiting to be supplied to the wholesale market.

Let us look at how the authorities view this deprivation. Again quoting from The Daily Star: "A high official of the revenue department of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) said the closure will not have much of an impact!!!"

during this period. To survive, the daily labourers would need to borrow money to eat on a daily basis.

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Amirah Islam is an Alevel student at Scholastica.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Invasion of western culture

Engr. Mohammad Arif Islam's letter about the cultural aggression of the west reminded me how persecuted some of my parents' generation felt in the UK in the 1950s because a lot of American soldiers were around and they felt they were 'taking over' the British culture with their music and 'style', their clothes and their manners!

But these sorts of 'cultural invasions' do not come from neo-colonialism or national conspiracies. No gang of evil men sits round tables and plots these things! They are usually triggered by fashions that are

picked up by smart businesses in all nations that see a way of making money by recording music, by advertising, by suggesting styles, by pandering to pop culture wherever it appears in this global village of ours called 'the world'. Regrettably, the pornographic film industry flourishes in every country. Here in Bangladesh, backstreet copiers, traders and naughty Cyber Cafes encourage it.

I fear that the real objection to these influences is that, if we do not want our young people's minds to be filled with rubbish, it means much harder work by parents and the community!

We all need to find ways of putting moral pressure on cyber cafes. It is also vital to regulate a child's television. I know some families in the UK who are so appalled at what is on TV these days that their children's televisions are not connected to the cable and they only watch approved videos.

Every country is quite capable of going to heaven or hell in its own sweet way. Don't blame it all on 'foreigners'! Angela Robinson Lalmatia, Dhaka

Traffic jam and Scholastica

This has the reference to letters on this topic published in DS, namely of Mr. Anis Rahman of DU (5.10.05), answered by Ms. Itrat M. Rahman of Scholastica management (12.10.05) sprouting some more subsequent letters (latest being on 2.11.05) from the sufferers.

Uttara Scholastica School, triggering felling of a good number of trees (greeneries are always the scape-goats), that would facilitate parking of a number of cars coming there (after all, most of the cars belong to bigwigs), let us presume that the problem of parking is being addressed to some extent.

on Plot-1, Rd-21, Section-4, Uttara, inside a residential area, just adjacent to the main mosque of the locality, and is situated on a narrow road almost at the intersection of Rd-16 and 21.

management has been considered enough to engage some "traffic controllers" of their own at the intersection of Rd-16 and 21 up to the entrance of the school, but in practice they only stop rickshaws and common pedestrians from using the thoroughfare by the side of the school.