

LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY NOVEMBER 15, 2005

A menacing agenda bares teeth again

No time for lip-service

O 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. Yesterday morning in Jhalakathi two assistant judges of the district court were killed and three other people were critically injured when a powerful bomb was thrown at a microbus in which they were sitting.

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. Elsewhere around the world, the targets for such attacks are more typically building, infrastructure, or everyday crowds of people, so as to sow the seeds of terror far and wide with the message that no one is safe.

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. In other words, the terrorists are hitting at the core of the nation's democratic, secular ethos and values. The idea, perhaps, is to replace our venerable legal system with one based on obscurantist interpretations of religious law. The terrorists can, therefore, be seen to be working towards the isolation of Bangladesh from the rest of the world.

This latest atrocity points to the viciousness of their agenda and the callousness with which they can take innocent lives. Worse still is the implication that they can pick and choose the time, date, and venue of their attacks with impunity.

The terrorists must be fought with all we have. There can be no peaceful co-existence with them. We have been grimly reminded that the government must take up the challenge before it is too late.

Afghanistan, China and Japan welcomed

More depth to Saarc

E 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. We congratulate them on their becoming part of the regional grouping -- in some capacity or the other -- and joining forces to promote understanding and cooperation among the nations of the region, and even beyond.

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. That Japan and China have evinced keen interest in the grouping must also be highly gratifying for the Saarc member-states. China and Japan can indeed play an important role in making Saarc a vibrant and potent regional platform by virtue of interacting with the two biggest economies of Asia. Saarc can look to new horizons of economic cooperation with the outside world. It is quite in keeping with the policy of opening up -- an integral part of the idea of viewing vital issues from the standpoint of globalisation. 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. It has been passing through a nagging political turmoil under foreign occupation which must now end. We hope too, that democracy will be restored in the country, which has already paid a heavy price through destabilisation and alien occupation. The membership of Saarc should give Afghanistan a new sense of bonding with its South Asian neighbours. And Saarc as a regional platform should be able to do its bit in mitigating the sufferings of Afghan people.



M ABDUL HAFIZ

HE festival of Eid is over, bringing, however, no festiv-

ity to the bulk of our population. It couldn't be otherwise in this country of many contradictions. Eid once again exposed the gaping holes in our system, the serious aberrations in the society, and the festering

wounds in the country's body politic. Understandably, the Eid festivities remained out of reach for the mongahit 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. The economic inequality has never been wider in the country

and seldom exhibited so nakedly. As the poor, the deprived, and the

PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

response, including the declaration of

a state of emergency and curfews in

draconian 1955 law proclaimed to

Paris has acquired continental dimen-

sions. The rioting spread to Berlin,

fact that similar, if less intense, disaf-

struggle for independence!

HE unprecedented urban

violence witnessed in France

has provoked a strong official

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 sociocultural event. Our clerics participating in them, although they preach the virtue of austerity and restraint from their pulpits in the mosques.

Eid in the time of monga

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), particu-

larly in monga-hit areas, the privi-

leged few gave way to reckless con-

sumerism, ostentation, and wastage.

Ironically, it all began with the

month of holy Ramadan. Supposed to

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. What a cruel joke in a country where our mothers and sisters are, more after than not, seen in

literally on scraps, without being accounted for and with no defined occupation.

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

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

this country.

rags! Bangladesh has long since been up

ingenuity, conformist disposition, and right connections, you can always stake a share in the ever-shrinking pie. "The more the merrier" is the maxim encouraged by our rulers while the donors also are after creating more and more brown sahibs from among us. It is through them that they wish to promote their agenda

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

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

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 business-

men, who make up the country's de

facto ruling elite, of course, with the

blessings of international financial

institutions. We are in one way or

other subsumed in it. With a little

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. The politicians bare their fangs menacingly when in power, and treat their benefactors, supporters, and the members of the electorate as a bunch of morons without any qualms.

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

sight.

Bangladesh politics easily win over

the voters at election time with their

mesmerizing tunes and syrupy prom-

ises. Once catapulted to power, they

and consumption -- Oriented hedothis game of musical chairs. Some resort to election engineering -- a nism. We seem to have been swept away by these forces after having lost terminology we now come across. There is also something called social our moorings and with no recovery in engineering to restructure the society In the meantime, the Pied Pipers of to make it workable. Has our respect

able civil society thought of it? 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 is. of course, another debate.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

Curing the French malady

"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. Angry protests followed, especially after Mr Sarkozy called the

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. A man with an Algerian name, but with the same qualifications, will get just 14.

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

- and crime. Today, more than half the French prison population comprises immigrants. The criminal justice system, based on the institution of the investigating magistrate with police powers, magnifies the anti-minority social bias. Last week, scores of people were sentenced to 10 months' imprisonment on scanty evidence presented

Going by numerous reports, many French South Asian migrants have

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 ethniccultural diversity imposes an artificial uniformity upon society. It tells the ethnic minorities that they don't exist -

opportunity

President Chirac took 11 days before reacting to the violence. Rivalry between Mr Sarkozy and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin muddied the official response

The French government has belatedly announced measures like reducing the age of apprenticeship from 16 to 14 years creation of an anti-discrimination agency, 20,000 state-paid jobs in poor suburbs, 100 million Euros for associations working there, and the establishment of 15 new special economic zones. Such measures are welcome. Yet, they

shouldn't be ad hoc, but part of a wellconsidered, institutionalised policy. At stake here 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. This must be reflected in official policy and mainstream values.

European societies must integrate immigrants by transforming themselves and evolving a pluralist selfidentity. This is the larger agenda of developing healthy models of integration, and overcoming ill-informed and parochial attitudes towards "others.'

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist

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.

Paris and 30 other cities. Ironically, the protestors "scum" who must be curfews are being imposed under a crushed.

At the root of the violence is excluquell resistance during the Algerian sion, frustration and hopelessness among the minorities, in particular those from the Maghreb -- North What started as a "local problem" in African countries like Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. They have long been targets of overt violence and Brussels and Rome -- highlighting the covert discrimination

Over the past decade, says sociolofection 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, 11 percent. The immediate cause of the rioting

A North African name often invites in Clichy-sous-Bois, a Paris suburb

gist Alain Touraine, the minorities' isolation has worsened and produced ghettoisation. Since September 11, they face even greater suspicion, discrimination and abuse. Joblessness among them often runs at 40 percent, much higher than the national rate of

young men with no future. In France, exclusion is further

> aggravated by a centralised police, which typically excludes the nonethnic French. There's no community-based "friendly" policing either --unlike, say, in Germany or Britain. There's an adversarial relationship

between the police and underprivileged communities "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. "The fact that there's little recognition of the impor-

tance of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism makes things worse.' HLMs are sites of poverty, frustra-

tion, 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. All citizens are identical in their Frenchness -- irrespective of ethnic identity, religious belief, or colour of skin

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

when they face discrimination on that very count. France recently banned the wear-

ing 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. In other countries like the UK. Canada or the US, such differences are tolerated and seen as essential to a proud multicultural identity. That's why one sees so many Asian and Caribbean faces on, say, BBC-World.

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

in just 15 minutes to magistrates.

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.

In the name of alleviating poverty...

AMIRAH ISLAM

and democracy in France.

N 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. The papers tell us that "Dhaka is all set to welcome the Saarc Summit." It is indeed a matter of pride that Saarc is being hosted by Bangladesh.

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. To Debapriya Bhattacharya, poverty is one of the heads of the twoheaded dragon traumatizing developing nations, and at the same time

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. To my mind the all-pervading question is: are we. in Bangladesh, aware of how poverty is created or understand what causes

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. The sources of the

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. This amounts to a bare minimum of Tk 800 for the four days. The shut down is depriving these hand-to-

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

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?

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

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

newspaper allege a total daily business turnover of Tk.600 crore. Most significantly, about 5,000 labourers and rickshaw-van drivers derive their daily hand-to-mouth living from

their work at Kawran Bazar. These daily workers at Kawran Bazar, who also have their families to support, earn between Tk.150 to Tk.200 per day. Many also eat their daily meals at the market. My ques-

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[!]" The Commissioner of Dhaka Metro-

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. A retailer in Gulshan who could not buy his supplies from Kawran Bazar spent almost Tk.700 trying to locate a place from which he could replenish his stocks and remarked that for example the retail price of a kilogram of onions

will have to go up to at least Tk.100

during this period. To survive, the daily labourers

would need to borrow money to eat on a daily basis. How far will the borrowed money go? How will they pay the money back? The Kawran Bazar shutdown will create a poverty and debt cycle for these people from which they may not be able to easily recover. Should we blame them if they are tempted to take short cuts to make up the shortfall? If someone offers these people money to do something illegal, how many would be able to resist? Would we then start calling these people terrorists?

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Amirah Islam is an Alevel student at Scholastica

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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 Ariful 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! We were quite paranoid at the time. I remember!

But these sorts of 'cultural invasions' do not come from neocolonialism 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. As for drug addiction, it is home-grown to the east, rather than the west, whose drug of choice was alcohol for centuries. I fear that the real objection to these influences is that, if we do not want our young people's minds to be filled

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 televiewing. 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. I am very disappointed at the lack of what I would call a 'TV Times' here, with full details of each day's programmes on every channel for a whole week - so that we can all, including parents, plan our own and our children's viewing, choosing only what is worthwhile watching and switching off the rest. Flicking with rubbish, it means much harder between channels is the way to waste

tion to rubbish. There are good programmes but just try and find them! This would only need one smart employee, an office and a computer and access to the newsvendors to sell it, maybe initially at a subsidised price. Could The Daily Star plus a small grant from a donor help us? A weekly inset? The present half-page is pretty useless. As for avoiding drug dependency, I am not surprised that some youngsters find they need drugs to relax because they have not developed any social skills. Most of them are under such pressure to 'get good grades' that the rest of what they need to grow up normally is put on 'hold'! Yet developing a child's social skills in an awful lot of time and to risk addic-Dhaka city is really hard work!

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. Now that city fathers have taken up the urgent task of carpeting the space between the main road and the footpath in front of

Uttara Scholastica School, triggering felling of a good number of trees (greeneries are always the scapegoats), 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. Well, none should forget that Scholastica management faced the music, nevertheless readers could yet be informed of the different facets of the problem. On behalf of the humiliated sufferers, may I bring forth another little example of the title above. Scholastica is rendering a good service by its extended outlets and educational institutions. There is a junior section of Scholastica School

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. A long trail of cars regularly occupy a stretch of Rd-21 and also Rd-16 from both ends (north and south) starting from 7:45 in the morning, three times a day with the start of the school and two breaks of different groups of students. Each car would drop the student right at the entrance of the school; hence a jam at the intersection of Rd-16 and 21 is unavoidable. There are many attendants to take care of the students, helping them out of car to lead inside the school premise. The school

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. Thus, the poor non-car riders have to take a detour from either side of the school. "There are good reasons to believe that the so called traffic controllers of the school do not perform their duties", one of the disgusted office-goers on rickshaw said. The school management should look into the matter. M.D.Haq Uttara, Dhaka 1230.

management has been considerate