

A window of opportunity for political engagement

The govt must seize it

WE begin by taking cognisance of the fact that a creditable thread of restraint ran through the opposition camp on the grand rally day as reflected by the proceedings, as well as the outcome, of the event. This obviously stood out contrasting with the provocative and intimidating stance taken by the ruling party and government (as inseparable entities) on Tuesday's massive opposition programme.

Leave aside, the usual hyperbolic clamours for toppling the government which is running out of its tenure anyway, with the election a year or so away, a certain sense of patient realism is discernable in the opposition's announcement of demands, which operatively, as far as the election goes, are about reform of the caretaker government system and that of the Election Commission. Some of the other components of the minimum national programme are the oft-repeated concerns of the civil society such as effective investigation into the bombings, punishment of the perpetrators, religious extremism-induced terrorism, effective working of the Anti-corruption Commission, separation of the judiciary from the executive, sky-rocketing prices etc. can be satisfactorily addressed in the next two months.

This being a catalogue of demands from the broad opposition delivered in a perfectly democratic manner cannot be treated with anything but seriousness if the government is at all interested in a political solution of the present crisis.

We believe there is flexibility in the opposition's programmes which provides a window of opportunity to defuse the crisis and move towards a more constructive political environment.

Either the government succumbs to ego-play sticking to the guns to self-peril or engages the opposition in a productive and mutually accommodative political dialogue paving the way for the general election. Rather than making perfunctory telephone calls to hand-picked opposition leaders or inviting the opposition through the media, BNP should launch a multi-pronged informal communication followed by formal approach to AL. Sooner the informal and inter-personnel channels are activated greater will be the chances for the dialogue to be held. And, to ensure that it happens, neither side should put any precondition to the very holding of talks.

Govt tirade against media continues

Free media can be bridge back to public trust

AS if the country did not have enough problems on its hands, members of the ruling alliance have once again spoken out against the media as the author of all their ills.

Terrorists are attacking the core values of our society, the latest JMB communique threatening dire consequences if December 16 is not replaced by August 14 as a national day, sky-rocketing prices are still not under control and the munga in the North remains unabated, but scapegoating the press still seems to be top priority for some in the government.

Rising on a point of order in parliament earlier this week, a member suggested that a new law should be framed to bring newspapers and journalists under speedy trial and provide for summary punishment for "objectionable" reports. It was further alleged that the media conspires to print fake news against popular ruling alliance lawmakers.

This intent to classify the media as lowly criminals liable to be subject to summary trial is a new low for the administration in its vendetta against the press. Worse still, the Speaker, instead of sounding neutral, reportedly suggested that journalists cannot be 'touched' under present law, implying the need for new law and that anyone aggrieved should go to the press court.

The idea clearly is to continue to try to screen officials and lawmakers from public scrutiny. We elect MPs to protect the rights of the people, including the right of freedom of speech and information, not themselves. This kind of self-serving legislation is unworthy of the House.

This tendency on the part of the government to attempt to muzzle criticism leaves the impression that they have something to hide, which is regrettable. If the government arrogates to itself the right to be beyond reproach or criticism -- that would be the beginning of the destruction of democracy.

We would like to caution the government that its performance over the past four years has been dismal and has severely corroded the public trust. It has one year left to regain this trust, and a free media is its only bridge back to the people, the only way to resurrect its tarnished reputation.

Fruitless bashing of the media will only lower the government's image further.

Are the religious extremists winning?



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

THE desperation into which some of us have been thrust by the activities of the terrorists gives one the impression that they are indeed winning the first phase of the battle -- the collapse of an organ of the state. The recent utterances of the judges and lawyers, the section most targeted by the religious terrorists in Bangladesh, reinforce this impression. It is has even forced one judge to hand in his papers. They judiciary continues to receive threats from the terrorists.

No one can fault the lawyers for feeling threatened because they have been the worst victims of the violence recently perpetrated by the Islamic terrorists, who seem to believe that by taking on the judiciary they can bring about Sharia law in the country. The members of the judiciary have given an ultimatum to the government to ensure their safety; failure to do so, according to them, would invoke actions on their part that might paralyse the judicial system. The members of the judiciary

are well within their rights to seek the protection of the state, like any other citizen of the country. But when, as a member of an institution, they think it prudent to relinquish their responsibility in the face of threats, they are playing exactly into the hands of the terrorists.

Nothing will give the terrorists more satisfaction and comfort than to see their plans paying off and the targeted group actually doing as they had anticipated their actions would

also comments from various political parties seem to give one the impression that terrorism is like any other law and order problem, which can be solved by the deployment of additional police or other law enforcement agencies.

Regrettably, neither the public nor the administration has yet fathomed the profundity and the complexity of the issue that demands a well thought out approach. But the public cannot be blamed for its impatience,

space to gain roots in the country. Their call to disassociate with the Victory Day, and instead revert to August 14 as Independence Day should indicate the orientation of these elements. There is perhaps a need for the BNP to study very closely the manifesto of its major alliance partner and see whether there is a fusion of views between these two! The government need not also waste time in trying to fathom out the political agenda of this group, or

open politics to restrain them.

The important question is how does one go about rendering the religious extremists inoperative?

First, it is imperative that the major partner in the ruling alliance listens to the voices from within. Some BNP MPs have thought it fit, belatedly though, to go public, not only about their apprehensions of the nexus, they have gone even further by identifying those that have played their part in the rise of the

There has to be two-pronged action taken, by the government and the people, in the fight against terrorism. The government must under no circumstance allow public confidence in it, and indeed public morale, to sap. Only by taking concrete actions can it prevent these two things from happening. On the part of the public, there must be no surrender to the terrorists. We must carry on with our usual life and without abdicating our responsibilities.

make them do. This is what they actually want to happen, a complete collapse of a vital organ of the state. The purpose of the terrorist violence, so far as we can make out, is a tactical expedient where violence is being perpetrated as a tool of terror to modulate our actions that would ultimately cause the issue to move in their favour. Giving in to threats is therefore not an option.

The way of combating the terrorists is not by ultimatum or by providing gunmen or flak jackets or issuing tax-free vehicles. These, if employed at all, can be temporary expedients at best. One must also understand that what has taken years to germinate cannot be taken out overnight. The utterances of not only the judges but

having faced nothing like this ever before. And if the government has been caught unawares, it is only the government that is to be blamed, because the media and some of the government agencies had been providing it with more than enough information to form a definitive impression of the rise of the Islamic extremists in Bangladesh.

Thus the government should not waste time in finding out the credentials of the groups that are involved in the so-called fight to establish Islamic law in Bangladesh. The recent expose of some ruling party MPs lends credence to the accusation that there is a link between some in the ruling alliance and the terrorists that have allowed them time and

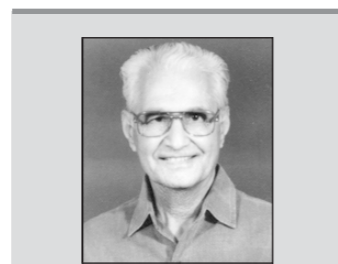
whether there are actually fundamentalist elements in the country as the State Minister for Home was inclined to think not very long ago.

The matter of concern is that these elements, having been fostered by some in the ruling alliance, have grown both in size and capacity. And seeing that their agenda cannot be achieved by those that they had put up to conduct the open platform politics, the extremists have now resorted to violence to fulfill their political agenda. As their graduated scale of action suggests, they have moved beyond the need to assert their presence to a more precipitative course of action that involves suicide missions. It has grown far beyond the manageable limits of their cohorts in

Islamic terrorists in Bangladesh also. This was common knowledge all along but to which the government had turned a deaf ear. A serious probe into the alleged links must be launched to ferret out these elements, and to determine the external linkage, about which there can be no doubt. Such an action by the government, one feels, would reinvest some credibility on the administration's commitment to fight these extremists. Credibility and trust in the government action lends strength to counter-terrorist actions.

Second, there is the propensity on the part of the state to base all counter-terrorist actions on force. As an analyst very cogently suggests, the first effect of terrorism on the admin-

A milestone on the road to nowhere



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THE thirteenth annual summit of the twenty years old South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was held after two postponements on November 12 and 13. There has been a lot of comment about the stunted growth of Saarc. Let's see what it has achieved and what it has not.

It is a regional cooperation organisation. It was conceived by Bangladesh but the two bigger states of South Asia, India and Pakistan, were not enthusiastic. The Indians thought that it is a ruse of the smaller neighbours gang up on India and may present it with unpleasant choices. Pakistanis, on the other hand, thought that a regional organisation would provide yet another platform for India to project itself as a pre-eminent South Asian power. Pakistan never displayed fascination for regionalism.

Saarc was unfortunate in not having a vision such as Europeans could seize on -- that of statesman Jean Monnet's initial vision. The real asset of the EU throughout has been that original vision of a friction-free region, devoted mainly to economic progress and pursuing a purely pacific policy. Unfortunately Saarc has had no such prophet with a vision.

For South Asians to emulate the

Europeans is facile. The Europeans had gone through three major wars between 1870 and 1945 -- destruction and carnage unimaginable to South Asians. Experiences of the peoples differ widely. Here the people's notion of war is romantic; it is all about gallantry and bravery. Europeans became determined never to have war after 1945. In contrast, both Indians and Pakistanis distributed sweets to celebrate their nuclear test explosions

ated with Saarc in any form; it later put forward the candidacy of Japan if China is to be admitted in some fashion. But ultimately good sense prevailed between the two and China was given an observer's status. What else has it achieved? Except the reaffirmation of all the old commitments little else. Repeating old resolves was hot air.

The truest thing that Pakistan PM Shaukat Aziz said was that India and

tudes, assumptions and beliefs that preclude cooperation between India and Pakistan. Only, the Indians display a certain amount of verbal virtuosity: they want closest of relations with Pakistan. But what Pakistan perceives is that that will militate against Pakistan's raison d'etre. Neither truly wants cooperation. For India, free trade and transit of goods through Pakistan matters most.

But all the same Pakistanis are far

PLAIN WORDS

Why would India and Pakistan cooperate unless there is an acceptable common goal? All that is required for reversal of this course is a change in thinking. Let Pakistan change its ultimate goal: put Kashmir on the backburner and let the economic and political interests of the common people of Pakistan be the criteria.

in 1998. Nevertheless, Europe's success makes it a role model for regional cooperation.

Which is why Saarc has produced only so many words and committed itself to achieving goals that require a truly close cooperation without mental reservations by all the member states. Actual achievements have thus been few. That is why this summit has achieved so little.

However, two positive achievements are: (a) Afghanistan has been admitted as a full member; and (b) the commitments about South Asia Free Trade Agreement have been reaffirmed. Indeed it has been stipulated that the roadblocks to Safta should be removed during this November itself so that it can come into force on time. But few expect this to happen. There was ugly manoeuvring by India and Pakistan over China's entry. The Indians opposed China being associ-

ated with Saarc in any form; it later put forward the candidacy of Japan if China is to be admitted in some fashion. But ultimately good sense prevailed between the two and China was given an observer's status. What else has it achieved? Except the reaffirmation of all the old commitments little else. Repeating old resolves was hot air.

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more obstreperous and more obsessive. So much so that future of Saarc is now hostage to Pakistani decision makers: the day Islamabad agrees to withdraw its objections to free trade, transit trade, free cultural exchanges and free movement of citizens and economic cooperation, Saarc will take off. Its take off can be swifter than that of the EU. We have the methodology of the EU available from its earlier stages to its present union status to benefit from. We can adapt their methodology to our conditions. The South Asians may not need half a century to achieve the kind of results that Europe has achieved. That is within realistic possibilities.

The Pakistan Prime Minister has reiterated the whole philosophy behind Pakistan's thinking in a simple sentence. He said that "unless Kashmir issue can be perceived as being processed and without that move-

sued this anti-India course. Let's see if it has gained anything.

To hold that unless Kashmir issue is solved first, peace in the Subcontinent cannot be ensured is an implied military threat. This is a statement of intent: we will not settle down and semi-war conditions will continue to prevail. The net result after 58 years of this policy is that the people are poorer than they might have been, if this mindset had not been there, while Kashmir solution is as distant now as it ever was. Pakistanis have gained neither Kashmir nor economic progress -- and have lost democracy in the process.

Why does Pakistan stick to this particularly barren course? It cannot force a war on India now. It will get nothing out of another war, except to self destruct. Why can't it do what the others have done: subordinate their political disputes to the need for

istration is the "militarisation of thoughts." This occurs particularly when a quick result is expected and when lack of progress in rounding up the terrorists is seen as lack of action on the part of the government. Thus, there is a call for more robust physical action against the terrorists and more proactive reactions rather than reactive response. While there can be no doubt that use of force at some level is inescapable, the thing to remember is that too much reliance on it will lead to inflexibility in the actions of those that are engaged in countering the terrorists. This is a limit that the state would do well to avoid, because this is exactly the reaction from the state the terrorists are trying to evoke.

There has to be two-pronged action taken, by the government and the people, in the fight against terrorism. The government must under no circumstance allow public confidence in it, and indeed public morale, to sap. Only by taking concrete actions can it prevent these two things from happening. On the part of the public, there must be no surrender to the terrorists. We must carry on with our usual life and without abdicating our responsibilities.

This is a battle that the terrorists would want to win in their "war" against the state but must never be allowed to succeed.

The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

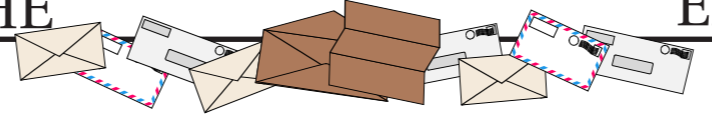
economic growth? For Pakistan and India, these growth processes can be intensified through direct and regional cooperation. It may not be a magic wand but regionalism does facilitate faster growth, if regional integration is substantial.

But why would India and Pakistan cooperate unless there is an acceptable common goal? All that is required for reversal of this course is a change in thinking. Let Pakistan change its ultimate goal: put Kashmir on the backburner and let the economic and political interests of the common people of Pakistan be the criteria. Pakistanis want economic prosperity with civic freedoms, more personal incomes, greater consumption and more leisure for cultural enrichment. To facilitate cultural enrichment intense cultural exchanges in the region are needed. Free trade and transit and economic cooperation necessarily yield a faster growth, leaving only the task of: how to distribute the additional wealth thus created.

If they do not depend on trickle down theory -- which has not worked for five decades -- growth can be attained though a paradigm shift. This is no place to discuss an alternative paradigm. All that needs to be said is that it is possible to have another paradigm. The whole question about the future will be decided in Islamabad. The question is: what are we interested in: deepening the animus against India or letting Kashmir issue be settled through its own dynamics. Meantime we should devote our resources to achieving faster economic growth with a human face.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

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.

'Tok Jhaal Mishti' a pure entertainment

On the occasion of Eid, young and talented film director Debasish Bishwas released a highly entertaining movie "Tok Jhaal Mishti." This was his second film. His previous film was also a successful one. This time around the expectations was much high and I must say Debasish lived up to the expectations.

To change the present scenario of Bangla film, films like "Tok Jhaal Mishti," "Meher Niger", "Mollabarir Bou" can do a world of good. Indeed the filmmakers and producers of such types of films are doing a commendable job. Because once creative films had to fight with the vulgar films but now this crisis is slowly but surely being overcome. The day is not far away when good and quality films will survive and vulgar filmmaking would stop once for all. But for that to happen, we, the viewers, and the quality film makers have to take a firm move against vulgar films.

Once again I would like to convey my heartfelt gratitude to Debasish for making our Eid so special with his 100 percent entertaining movie. You

should keep it up for the sake of our struggling film industry.
Nazmus Saquib
Notre Dame College, Dhaka

The Hajj air fare

What is going on? Why government has to subsidise pilgrims for Hajj? Isn't it the edict of the Quran that Hajj becomes compulsory when one can afford to perform it with one's own resource after fulfilling all other obligations? The plain fact is-- if you cannot afford the regular airfare then Hajj is not compulsory (Farj) for you. Unfortunately neither government nor the media is pointing out this fact.

H. Khan
New York, USA

The biggest problem

Each day we hear people talking about their problems. Children having problems with their toy cars, businessmen having problem with their goods, and I, personally having problems while talking, writing and sleeping, of course. Can we think about a problem, affecting our lives, places and time? Can we think about a problem, affecting our future, hopes and luck? Think as the problem is

knocking at our door and our child will open the door within a short time.

The problem is "terrorism" or "world terrorism" you may say.

It is not a problem of United States or Iraq; it is ours, mankind's maybe forever. Our security forces are searching for militants day and night, but what will really happen? One will be jailed; another will join the bombers to be. We can hurt terrorist by arms, cannot destroy it. So, who can help? It's the educated leaders and teachers, who can help and teach people, even religiously. If Islam does not say to choose the path of violence then it says to teach and invite people to the path of peace. Terrorism is like a deadly virus, which has already infected our community and needs to be tackled by joining hands.

We can fight a "war on terror," but not by false excuses; we can fight with kindness and literacy. We must be very careful while taking steps. Why Iraq is in fire? Because the war was truly unnecessary. If Saddam Hussain had remained as the President of Iraq, he would not let Al-Qaida to move into his country, as it has now. Then United States could have put political pressure on Saddam to promote

freedom and democracy in the country. Also they could have tried to develop healthy relations with the Arab world and with whole Muslim population, so that Bin Laden would not have any chance to encourage innocent people to join his network, which has more spread more all around the world.

Tahsin Hyder
Maple Leaf International School, Dhaka

Black athletes and stereotyping

We all know blacks are dominating sports such as American football, basketball, sprints and the list goes on and on. Lot of debates has been made here in United States whether or not it is generic. In my opinion it might be true but there is a catch in that statement. If we look at the head coaches in those sports it is dominated by the white people.

The stereotyping of black sports that blacks are born to be athletes should be stopped.

Nurul Abrar
University Of Miami, Florida
O-A level award

ceremony

It has been extremely disappointing for the English medium students, specifically for The Daily Star awardees this year as The Daily Star Award Ceremony is heard to have been cancelled for certain reasons. It should be noted that this kind of inspiration is very much needed for the students to obtain good results in their O'level and A'level examinations, which, making The Daily Star has been providing.

Students of HSC and SSC who are excellent results are being rewarded and inspired by award functions whereas the English medium students who are doing equally well are suffering a blind eye from the government. Why such discrimination? Aren't we working hard enough to obtain 6As and above? Is it too much to expect a humble token of appreciation after the stressful exams?

We do hope and expect that the matter will be taken into consideration and the government will take steps to ensure equality between the education standards of the HSC-SSC and the O-A levels. Such inspirational

projects should be more frequently organised as the students will then have a motive to work harder.
Sabiha Mowla
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Destructive politics

According to newspaper report and the claim of the opposition, government arrested huge number activists to sterilise the 14-part mass rally. This is common practice in our country. After establishing democracy in 1990, both Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are blaming each other for destroying congenial environment in our country. Basically they are the two sides of the same coin. When they are in power they like to satisfy the World Bank, IMF and imperialist group defying the public interest and when in opposition, reject parliament, trying to form anti-government movement from the very beginning of the new government. This is the short description of their destructive politics. People don't support the AL's anti government movement like hartal, strike, setting fire to buses. They don't also support the government decision like increasing oil price

and daily necessities. So the general people are annoyed with their politics. We should reject their politics and find a new political system to solve this problem.
Taslim Hasan Sabu
University of Dhaka

France's image crisis

France could not hold the balance of justice rightly emanated from its revolution mottoes: Freedom, fraternity and equality. The flourished France is now groaning under its so called modern machinery. The recently occurred violence bears the testimony of a selfish France to its ethnic minority. The riots that have wracked France due to defying the rights of immigrant minority hailing from its former colony of north and central Africa are not negligible. France forgot that it had sucked the blood of the forefathers of these people.

Besides, the administration alienated the Muslim people banning "Hizab", that is an innocuous custom, under the pretext of secularism and squeezed the religious freedom. But the irony is that she could not uphold the principle of secularism for all

citizens irrespective of race, colour and creed. The humble-birth marginal people could not enter the door of high rank jobs. They could not even cross the path going through aristocratic residence. The cop would misbehave. These blatant example of class distinction fanned the fire pushing their back on the wall inciting them the spree of vandalism with a surge of car-burning, arson attacks and rioting.

Their participation was spontaneous. The administration stumbled to check the riots as outpouring expression of public backlash that can persist even strong government. Jacques Chirac, the president of France did not repudiate the charges. Time will say, whether France wipes out the tarnished image or be further torn in civil war? We hope to see France as prestigious in solving the untoward incidents dealing with public interest cautiously, not by using whimsical force.
Abdullah-al-Mujahid
Dhaka University