

National dialogue on terrorism

BNP should be sincere and AL should not give any re-condition

AT long last, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has put out a call to all political parties for talks on militancy and terrorism, acknowledging it as a national challenge that can't wait to be addressed except in a wholly concerted manner. However, it remains unofficial. Her public call should be followed by formal invitation for dialogue.

The media and the civil society have in so many words been calling for a national dialogue to brainstorm on the unremitting militancy lethally topped off by suicide bombers to salvage the battered nation out of it. We would like to believe that the PM has paid heed to such a counsel after all, even if belatedly, which is a welcome sign.

But it is reasonable to conclude as well that she has acted out of a self-realisation at the monstrosity of the problem going out of her government's hands. She can't solve it single-handedly; she does need the cooperation of the opposition. This newly dawned sense of realism on the PM's part is a good point to start building confidence in the public mind about mobilising the whole nation behind the cause.

We would also like to believe that her choice of the dialogue path should mark the end of the conspiracy theory that she and her senior colleagues had been vociferously spouting around in ascribing the bombings to a nexus between internal forces and an unnamed country without substantiating such a claim. At first it was the opposition to lay the blame on, then it was burying the head in the sand against the storming militancy, and later came the conspiracy finger-pointing to unidentified sources. But now, with governmental indifference and attribution of conspiracy hopefully out of the way, we should expect a sincere and robust collective endeavour to grapple with the uncontrolled surge in targeted terrorism. For this to happen, Begum Zia must ensure that BNP speaks with one voice; otherwise her efforts will be negated by what others in her party may say. The doublespeak in her party must end and she has to lead the way to make it happen.

For their part, it is imperative that the opposition does not set any pre-condition to a dialogue with the government on the crucial issue of terrorism.

Let a dialogue be held immediately. People want to see the leaders of both sides sit down and devise a way out of the stranglehold of terrorism. The act of sitting together of both parties will itself help to raise public confidence.

Hartal and court boycott

Why, against whom?

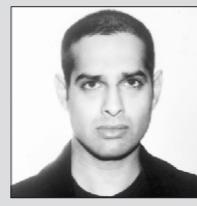
SECURITY of life is one of the fundamental rights of each and every citizen of the country guaranteed by the Constitution. It is twice more horrifying when violation of that right is carried out at the very doors of the court premises killing judges and lawyers particularly when judiciary happens to be the most important instrument for upholding the constitution and rule of law.

Even so, yesterday's dawn-to-dusk hartal called by the lawyers passed off not without leaving a question-mark on the public mind. Was it not superfluous, was it not avoidable? Most people would ask. For, although the righteous indignation was directed against the government, in reality it is the public who suffered for it.

Why bring life to a standstill when the government's failure to protect judges against terror attacks is well-formed public knowledge and the outrage felt is universal and pronounced across the country. Voices have been raised from all corners of the country to eliminate the militant threats against judiciary posing the greatest danger of destroying all that the state stands for, holds dear. When the entire country is up in protests against terror bombings targeted at the judges and the judiciary as an institution, was there any need for the strike? What purpose has the strike served except to deal a blow to the country's economy and cause public hardship?

To our mind, any boycott of courts will be self-defeating. Bringing any part of the judiciary to a halt is what the militants wish to see happen. They are out to put the system in jeopardy. And let's not forget, it's by constant vigil and robust counter-action based on latest combat tactics that we can defeat the terrorists, not by protests alone.

May I have your attention please?



ZAFAR SOBHAN

need to address it head on.

Now, even if their salary or something else depends on them not understanding it, their life and the life of everyone in the country and the country itself depends on their understanding that the extremists mean business and that continuing to ignore or to minimize the rising threat is no longer an option.

There can be little doubt that the terrorists are merely getting warmed up and that the coming months will see further escalation in terms of attacks.

if we do not unite to confront this threat?

Ever since I started writing this column some two years ago, I have had people suggest to me that I am being unnecessarily alarmist with respect to the extent of the extremist threat to the country.

In fact, I have heard this argument made again and again over the years, and not merely about my column, but about the extensive reporting and editorial commentary that The Daily Star has devoted to informing the public about the

hauls and repeated terrorist attacks that people could continue to believe that the media is blowing things out of proportion, but this is what happens when people are willing to subjugate common sense and the national interest to partisan politics.

One hopes that the twin suicide bombings on the court premises of Chittagong and Gazipur that killed nine and injured over eighty on Tuesday and the suicide bombing in front of the Gazipur deputy commissioner's office yesterday will

wider circle of supporters is by no means extensive enough to constitute any kind of a threat to the country as a whole.

However, this argument is misguided. In the first place, even though the network of extremists and supporters may be small in absolute terms, no one knows what their actual numbers are. In the second place, their numbers, however small, are augmented significantly by the number of enablers that the extremists evidently have in place in key

is to err, it is better to err on the side of caution, and I want to make clear that the comforting bromides we tell ourselves about the moderation of the population and the unpopularity of the militants, so as not to have to face up to the fact that the core of the nation is being threatened, are keeping us from taking the steps we need to take in order to get to grips with this crisis.

So what needs to be done?

The first step is to focus on the reality and immediacy of the crisis at hand, and to stop worrying about the image of the country or what people outside of Bangladesh might think, which, I am sorry to say, appears to have been the principle consideration governing internal discussion of the issue, and to begin to engage in what we have still to initiate -- an honest and forthright national discussion on the terrorist threat.

We need to understand that right now this is the sole issue that we should be focusing on as a nation. The discussion of the terrorist threat -- and by extension discussion of what steps need to be taken to counter the threat -- is still dominated by the voices of those who, for purposes of political expediency or ideological conviction or perhaps just common or garden idiocy, refuse to see the truth of what is staring them in the face.

The first step towards healing is always acceptance. And it is only when we accept where we are as a nation and how we got here that we can have a meaningful and purposeful discussion of how to pull ourselves back from the edge of the precipice.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

STRAIGHT TALK

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The attack on the AL rally last August 21 and the assassinations of Ahsanullah Master and SAMS Kibria sent the message that no one is immune to being targeted.

The serial bombings of August 17 sent the message that the terrorists possess the manpower, sophistication, and organizational capacity to strike anywhere in the country and at anytime.

And the suicide bombings of this week have sent the message that there are no barriers to how far the terrorists are willing to go in order to succeed in their mission.

So is this the beginning of the end for the Bangladesh of our Liberation War dreams? Is the curtain about to fall on our way of life

extremist menace.

Earlier this week, not three days before the twin suicide strikes on the court premises in Chittagong and Gazipur, no less an eminence than a former minister, who has held multiple portfolios in the service of different administrations, suggested to me that some newspapers were trying to destroy the country with their sky-is-falling reporting about the extremists.

In this, he was merely echoing what a number of current ministers and the PM herself are on record as saying about the media's role in creating the spectre of the extremist menace.

It never fails to astonish me that even in the wake of massive arms

once and for all bring home to the entire country the enormity of the threat that we are facing and the consequent danger of minimizing it for political reasons.

In fact, it seems to me that the terror threat is so great today as to render all other debate about the direction of the country more or less meaningless.

The fact that the attackers were suicide bombings is extremely significant. These are the first such attacks on Bangladeshi soil and signal a dramatic escalation in the destructive tactics employed by the extremists.

Some might argue that in absolute terms the number of extremists is very small and that even their

positions within the administration and government services. Numbers are not nearly as important as access to influential positions in the corridors of power.

Finally, we would do well to remember that if the people as a whole, due to either indifference or intimidation, sit idle and inactive in the face of acts of terror and carnage, that it might take only a relatively small number of determined, ruthless, and unprincipled militants to throw the nation into utter chaos.

This is not to suggest that Bangladesh today stands at the brink of an imminent take-over by the extremists or that we have reached anywhere close to the point of no return. However, if one

Our own 9/11



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

enemies in those countries, either occupying forces, or separatist movements or sectarian rioters. Who exactly is the enemy of the suicide bombers who chose to dismember themselves in Ghazipur, Chittagong and Jhalakathi? Why are they targeting judges, lawyers and courthouses? None of them make the laws, and none of them decide how to run the country. They merely interpret the law, cross-examine witnesses and give verdicts, mere instruments in

the country, to eradicate vices, to go to heaven. Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen and two other banned groups named Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh and Harkatul Jihad have claimed they have got 2000 suicide bombers who are ready to go.

When a suspected car bomb exploded underneath the World Trade Center in New York in 1993, an eyewitness named Bruce Pomper said, "It felt like an airplane hit the building." In September

two seats of justice, two symbols of a decadent system.

Yet the means doesn't justify the end. We have got corruption, all sorts of moral deviations, social ills that can easily upset devout souls, souls believing in purity, fairness and justice. Those who have been plundering the country, those who have been taking it for granted, those who have been overstepping their limits in greed, tyranny, hedonism, hypocrisy, arrogance and profligacy, these people need to be

make a point are too silly to be beheaded. You will no longer get a chance to see them in the firing squads or gas chambers. You will not even see their faces at times, disfigured by the blast of bombs, faceless, nameless, like a James Bond gadget that turns into smoke after the job is done.

Nothing is wrong with that so long as one knows where to draw the line. The revolutionaries of the old days accosted martyrdom by standing up to a tyrant or debauch,

CROSS TALK

Last Tuesday was our own 9/11 (though it was 11/29). It is the beginning of a new chapter in our history when we are going to watch over a progressive dichotomy in our mental space between criminals and crusaders. We are going to have organized crime on one side and then the self-made vigilantes on the other, clash of convictions that will push us further down the collision course. We need an army to invade that space, an army of character, courage, and ruthless conviction before they stockpile more weapons of mass destruction. I don't mean the real army. It's just a figure of speech!

the ongoing saga of crime and punishment.

Not to say, these instruments are flawless. Some of them also take bribe, cheat, lie, compromise, and perpetrate nefarious acts to distort justice. Some of them are perhaps as guilty as the criminals they try, undermining law instead of upholding it. But why should they become the targets while more notorious people are around? Why not police stations? Why not politicians? Why not corrupt bureaucrats who are milking the country?

Then it's not the time to look for questions, but to find answers. The suicide bombers who entered the courthouses with deadly explosives strapped to their bodies must have had some death-braving logic. Someone somehow must have convinced them that it was the right thing to do, to establish God's rule in

2001, his words proved prophetic as planes indeed hit the twin towers of the World Trade Center and razed them to the ground. But then who could tell it was going to happen like this, that the beast of terror was going to get so furious and ruthless that it would change the course of our civilization for good.

We can blame it on anybody we want. We can blame it on Osama bin Laden, we can blame it on George W. Bush. We can blame it on the government, the opposition, the Jamaat-e-Islami and all those militants out there waiting to strike. But the rude awakening is that the time for rhetoric is over, because what we have been debating for last several years is now real. Perhaps the two suicide attacks in two courthouses last Tuesday have some similarity with the attacks on the Twin Towers, two identical targets,

held accountable for their mischief, and brought to justice for their guilt.

Is suicide bombing the right way to do it? Besides, the legal system is so remote from the real problem that to address it by throwing bombs into the courthouses is as ludicrous as trying to cook your dinner on top of a tree while lighting the fire at the bottom. The point is that while somebody must do something about our rotten society, it can't come by the barrel of a gun or bang of a bomb. It can bring more confrontation and division, without bringing the change we need. It will be waste of time and lives, barking up the wrong tree.

Our nation is seething with anger in the wake of Tuesday's bomb attacks as lawyers and politicians took the streets and called for another strike. Then again people who choose to tear their limbs to

risking their lives for values, principles, justice and freedom. They throw bombs, drew knives and fired guns, and then, when caught, walked up to gallows or lined up in the firing squad holding their heads high. Some of them carried cyanide buttons, which they swallowed if they couldn't stand the torture or approached breakdown before giving confessions.

The suicide bomber takes no risk and comes prepared to die. He gives out justice and takes the punishment. He shrinks the judicial system within his madness, ruling out prospects of trial, lawyers, courtrooms, judges and hangmen. All those roles rolled into one, the suicide bomber changes the face of martyrdom, at once becoming the victim and the victimizer. You will no longer see a rebel hanging from the hangman's rope, or kneeling before

that the guillotine waiting to be beheaded. You will no longer get a chance to see them in the firing squads or gas chambers. You will not even see their faces at times, disfigured by the blast of bombs, faceless, nameless, like a James Bond gadget that turns into smoke after the job is done.

That explains why the suicide bombers have so much spite against the organized justice where men are tried under man-made laws. But that is only the starting point. They are getting into other areas, threatening to blow up administrative presences, diplomatic missions, and the headquarters of the national airline. They have threatened to kill the judges when they go home for the winter vacation in December. It is obvious that they are blind with rage, even oblivious to common sense that in their ruthless behaviour, they are committing what they condemn, the same lawlessness, despair and hatred splattered by their exploding bodies as they swear to fix through their sacrifice.

Last Tuesday was our own 9/11 (though it was 11/29). It is the beginning of a new chapter in our history when we are going to watch over a progressive dichotomy in our mental space between criminals and crusaders. We are going to have organized crime on one side and then the self-made vigilantes on the other, clash of convictions that will push us further down the collision course. We need an army to invade that space, an army of character, courage, and ruthless conviction before they stockpile more weapons of mass destruction.

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Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

How successfully is the local government system working?

Big political parties in general seem to agree that there is no alternative but to strengthen local government to meet the development needs of the people of Bangladesh. Yet, the local government structure of the country is weak and its power is limited. So why are political leaders reluctant to take stronger steps to redress the issue? Moazzem Hossain of BBC investigates:



বাংলাদেশ সংলাপ

BBC বিবিসি বাংলাদেশ

Each Thursday in Tebaria, a union parishad close to the town of Natore, there is a hive of activity in the village court. Attempts are made to quiet down different types of disputes among the villagers in the presence of the union parishad chairman and other respectable village personalities. But the parishad has many other responsibilities in addition to adjudicating and arbitrating over local disputes.

Golam Sarwar, chairman of the Tebaria union parishad says that they are exhausted with the pressure of so many different types of jobs. "Union parishads have 10 compulsory responsibilities and 48 optional tasks. Moreover, circulars are coming daily from different ministries of the government asking us to do many more new jobs," he says.

"If the dead body of a dog is left on the street, the union parishad is

responsible for dumping that dead animal. Family planning, birth registration, health, education, and sanitation -- these jobs are our responsibility. But it's not possible for us to carry out all these responsibilities."

Whenever the issue of development is raised, most villagers want roads, bridges, and financing towards schools or mosques. But how much of these development needs can the union parishads satisfy? Villagers sitting in a tea-stall in one of the bazaars have strong opinions.

"Forget the construction of our roads and bridges, union parishads cannot even pay the wages of their guards and employees. What development will they do for us?" asked Abubakar Siddiqui.

"Law and order in the villages is another responsibility of the union

bazaar, its roads are jammed with rickshaws and hand-carts. While the bazaar is busy like this at midday, the scene at the nearby upazila parishad complex is totally different. Rows of offices are totally empty by early afternoon.

The absence of staff and the overall impression of inaction do not necessarily mean that people are away without leave, says UN representative Masud Karim. According to him many officers have to go to the court to supervise work. But he has no explanation as to why all of the officers of the upazila parishad are absent at the same time.

Local MP Shahjahan Choudhury said that, although the upazila parishad system is an important part of the local government system, it is too lethargic. He says that often upazila officers are not properly accounting for their time, which is why there is sloppiness in their activities. Mr Choudhury said that it is regrettable that upazila elections are becoming weaker day by day. If there had been an elected upazila parishad then the union parishads would not have become so weak. But the politicians are not interested in it."

Dr. Badul Alam Mazumder was associated with this citizen's forum called *Sthaniya Sarkar Sahayak Group*.

But he says that unfortunately he did not get a positive response from politicians towards their initiative.