LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY DECEMBER 6, 2005

Welcome judicial intervention

Public must be kept abreast of developments

UDOS to the Supreme Court for upholding the order of the High Court, instructing the government to submit periodic progress reports to it on the investigations into the various terrorist attacks across the country.

The issue of the continuing terrorist attacks is one that needs to be ventilated in public. Furthermore, the status of the various investigations and the information that these have revealed need to be made public.

The government has conspicuously failed to keep the public informed with respect to the on-going investigations, with the result that an alarmed population remains largely in the dark about the extent of the terror threat and about what steps are being taken to keep the public safe.

Indeed, the government has also not been able to initiate any kind of national dialogue on the issue. There has been virtually no meaningful discussion in parliament, and the government has shown a marked reluctance, even hostility, to discuss the issue as raised by the press.

Against this backdrop, we feel that it is only appropriate for the judicial branch to step in and take a role. This kind of intervention into affairs of state for the national good is absolutely within the purview of the judiciary, and when the other organs of government are under-performing, we expect and congratulate the court for insisting that they do better.

Our one proviso is that we would urge the courts to bear in mind that keeping the public informed should also be part of the process, and to the extent that the judiciary can facilitate this, it would be of benefit to the nation. Ensuring the public is informed will also further incentivise the government to take the investigations seriously forward. Public confidence, which is missing at present, will grow, and public fears that the investigations are off-track can be allayed.

The administration should understand that the court order is, in fact, in the government's interest. The court order will have the effect of making the investigation process more transparent and accountable, which will in turn enhance both the effectiveness of the investigations and the public's confi-

Good initiative by business leaders

PM expected to be the prime mover for national dialogue

E welcome the top business leaders' initiative to get the prime minister and the leader of the opposition to sit across the table for a national dialogue on how best to combat terrorism. Trade and commerce have been hit the hardest by the recent spate in terrorist activities and the investment scenario is likely to worsen under the shadows of violence and insecurity if these are allowed to continue.

However, two points made by the prime minister when the business leaders met with her, to give vent to their very wellfounded worries, have drawn our attention. First, she has reportedly stated that the bombings originated during the previous Awami League government's tenure and since that government had failed to investigate the incidents properly, bombings are still going on. We have to say that what is precisely at issue at this point in time is how the incumbent government has been handling the scourge of terrorism that has intensified over much of its tenure in clear-cut cause-andeffect sequences. The question is what has it done to resolve the cases of bomb attacks on 21 August 2004, Kibria assassination, the countrywide blasts on 17 August this year, the brutal killings of the two young judges, and the suicide bomb explosions in Chittagong and Gazipur?

Secondly, when the business leaders mentioned it to the prime minister citing press reports that a section of the govern ment high-ups were encouraging or even patronising the militants, the PM questioned the very credibility of the newspaper reports. All this appears to have an echo of what some of the senior cabinet members, like, Moulana Nizami, for instance, have been saving about press reports.

If this is her approach to the problem of militancy or how she feels about it, we would like to hope that this is not the case, then we are afraid, it might send across confusing signals about the prospects of a national dialogue.

Again, has the process of a national dialogue begun, as the PM has apparently hinted at, following her talks with the business leaders? Much as we appreciate the trade leaders' overture in having a meeting with her, an appropriate political dialogue on a national scale remains a far cry. Besides, the talks were held at the initiative of the trade bodies not that of the government. There is no point in approaching the dialogue issue in a perfunctory manner because tackling terrorism is too grave an agenda for that. In the ultimate analysis there is no gainsaying the fact that the PM has to take the leading role

in making the dialogue happen with the opposition.

Blasts and bleeding



Y colleague Ghulam Hossain informed me that the proposed seminar that he planned to hold in Dhaka has been postponed and shifted to Japan on the heels of deteriorating security conditions in the country. A business friend of mine lamented over the delays in business deals with a foreign partner on account of the growing number of terrorist attacks in the country. Chamber bodies are of the view that the economy is bleeding due to recurrent blasts. This observation is also confirmed by the statistics of the outside agencies.

Crisis always curses the poor the most. The driver of the taxi cab who drove me to Jahangirnagar University

campus last night tells me the horror that he and other drivers have to face every day. After leaving the cab in the garage at 12 pm. they usually return home. The police on duty take them to custody on "suspicion" of security breach, and after getting some money, release him the next morning. He further

to move, transact, speak, and lead a life of healthy citizens. Panic all around grips the country. The most recent suicide bomb blasts at Gazipur and Chittagong seem to suggest that the society that we live in is becoming more and more insecure. According to the opinions of the

mean the time when newspaper reports ran galore about their atrocities in the northern part of the country. When people were killed and hanged in trees and when the fundamentalist forces paraded in the streets with heads held high and chests puffed out, we underestimated their power to make our lives hell

in time could possibly have saved us if adequate arrangements had made at that

Besides that point, the fact that a large number grenade attacks and killings of politicians and educationists all over the country in the recent past did not result in the culprits being places that the government started to show some signs of sincerity.

We think that the government has to take into serious consideration the allegation that a portion of those running the country administration are in fact fueling the fire. Mr Abu Hena's observations could be the basis for an investigation to identify the main culprits. Without removing the dead rats from the well, the lifting of water and pouring fresh water is not going to solve the problem permanently. To make the appeal for a national dialogue convincing, the government must shed its support to those who are alleged to have links with the terrorists. The government has missed a number of golden opportunities to tame the terrorists but a failure at this moment might cost us heavily. The sooner we realize the gravity of the situation, the better it is for the nation, especially for BNP.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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informed me that his income from driving a cab -- the sole means by which he feeds a family of five -- came down by 20 per cent over the last few days.

The vendor that sells vegetables to us reported of his fall in income due to transport strikes and hartals following the

The above episodes are only a few that indicate the impact of the on-going ferocities that have caused us to forfeit our freedom concerned citizens and politicians -- including a large number of them belonging to the ruling party -- the country is poised at the brink of its gravest security problem not even observed during the period of the war of liberation. The question is why?

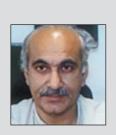
It is perhaps because we have tacitly encouraged the evil forces to ply their trade by not taking them to book at a very early stage. By early stage we within a span of two years or so. When the Prime Minister of

the country wanted Bangla Bhai to be arrested long ago, a group of her party men allegedly protected him by giving him shelter. The expelled BNP lawmaker Mr Abu Hena described how his fervent appeal to contain the terrorists went in vain in the face of strong support from some of the members of the parliament and the cabinet. The proverbial stitch

brought to book must have also served to encourage the terrorists. We can cite the examples of the grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina and her party colleagues on August 21, 2004, the brutal attacks on Ahsanullah Master MP. SAMA Kibria MP, Dr Yunus, and Prof. Humayun Azad should have revealed the reality of the threat to the government. It is only when the bomb blasts took place in courts and common

Jahangirnagar University.

Sounds of silence



M.J. AKBAR

F you want to understand the Big Story, look for the small detail. When the action is being broadcast in the merciless way that television adopts, get out of the din and check the silence. The sound of the breaking story can be very loud; in the case of the Iragi oil scam that has splattered the life and career of former foreign minister Natwar Singh and could spill over into Congress fortunes, the noise has been powerful enough to shatter the glasshouse in which Delhi VIPs live. But the sound of silence can be louder.

There was no home more silent than that of Mr Natwar Singh on Friday, December 2, the day Aaj Tak, building on the nterview that India's ambassador to Croatia, Aniel Matherani, gave to Saurabh Shukla of India Today, exposed how precisely the lucrative deal had been made by the minister's son Jagat and his "cousin" Andaleeb Sehgal with the Saddam Hussein regime. Media. planted outside the walls of the ruling class bungalow, reported that all phones, including mobiles inside the Natwar establishment had been switched off, but of course they were referring only to those numbers that they knew of. Cabinet ministers have the use of secure telephone systems limited to select levels of power, and surely there was a mobile number or two that was unknown to media. There were no calls made on Natwar Singh by

friends or ministerial colleagues in his moment of anguish, possibly to save embarrassment to both host and quest, or maybe because there was nothing much to say after Matherani's revelations.

Matherani was a member of the delegation led by Natwar Singh to Baghdad during which the deal was apparently made, and his recollection of detail was devastating. Late in the evening, Mr Natwar Singh came out to

that he did not even sit down, and he made the memorable statement that young Andy was not a particularly good friend, just one of many acquaintances. I don't think he wants to be reminded of that now: live by the media, die by the media. On Friday, both father and son seemed to have taken a vow of silence, leading to gossip that someone had given a few orders. Silence is not the preferred weapon of the Singhs.

In the evening the agencies Prime Minister Manmohan

his post in Zagreb. One could ask why, and why he has not returned as yet, and the answers would be most interesting; but that would not be the most important question. A far better question would be to ask why he was sent as ambassador in the first place. Was he the leading expert on the intricacies of Balkan politics? It was a grace-and-favour job: Natwar Singh had gracefully rewarded favours done.

There was a bit of huffing about nomic" component (read oil vouchers for latter): that the "complete breach of privacy." Well, it was a long breach, because the interview was pretty comprehensive, and while our ambassador to Croatia might not win the next Nobel Prize for Physics, he was surely aware that he was passing on information of volatile importance at a very crucial moment. More to the point is whether what he said, and he definitely did say it, is true or not.

The denial adds that the inter-

view was "distorted" and "misrep-

resented" and "out-of-context."

Where? The Matherani denial

never explained what had been

distorted or misrepresented. As

heard on television and published

arrangements had been made earlier and all that was required was to give implicit legitimacy to the Singh-Sehgal partnership, which was done; how they stayed back in Amman on the return journey in order to complete the deal in Jordan. I could repeat all this verbatim, but a column has space limitations. I might however quote the last sentence of the interview: "That Natwar and the Congress never knew is hogwash.'

This is the indictment of an insider who wants to remain an insider, as the "denial" indicates. The individual and the party knew, and deliberately attempted a cover-up, according to India's ambassador to Croatia, a position that he still formally holds. All his statements so far are statements of a high, and highly-paid, official of the government of India, appointed by this government.

There is one sound that Natwar Singh, his son Jagat, and their acquaintance-cum-friend-cumcousin-cum-partner (these are only the avatars one is aware of. there could be more) Andy Sengal must be praying for: the sound of silence. Their presumption must be that public memory is short and media memory a total dwarf: that time will somehow make this story go away. The establishment also must have a vested interest in a slow fadeout. for who knows what will emerge in the next interview: the stress on middlemen fearing that they will be made scapegoats must be

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has a simple responsibility. and one addresses this to him because of the belief that he is an honourable man. He must prove. and quickly, that India is ruled by the law, and Delhi is different from Saddam Hussein's Baghdad.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

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read a simple, and very short, statement in which he denied all allegations, and reiterated that his conscience was clear, but did not explain the reasons for such clarity. He added that his lawyers were looking into the matter. He did not specify whether he was planning to sue India Today, Aaj channels and newspapers carrying the full story. He could also have been planning to sue Aniel Matherani, but I rather doubt that. I mention this because someone in the Congress once threatened to sue the United Nations, and that did not quite happen.

The silence was particularly deafening because it was in sharp contrast to the megawatt protests of outrage that followed the revelations of the Volcker report some weeks ago. Mr Singh then sought out anyone and everyone in order to pour scorn, vitriol, anger, vehemence on Paul Volcker and anyone who thought the latter had a point. Such was the media high that son Jagat was trundled out to supplement father Natwar. Young Jagat was so stiff

issued a statement from our ambassador in Croatia, denying he had made any accusations against his former boss in the government and still his senior in the Congress Party, the leader of his famous delegation to Baghdad in 2001, Natwar Singh. Aniel Matherani is a nice sort of

with lots of hair on his head and plenty of smiles on his face, but you wouldn't want to put him at the head of any research project. His great asset has been loyalty to the Congress. He has been a functionary in the Congress office through thick and thin -- and the years of thin have outnumbered the years of thick. I don't know if he always spelt his first name the way he does now; most Anils prefer to stick to four letters. I suspect that some astrologer advised the alteration to change his luck. If that is true, find out the astrologer's name, because the Congress victory 18 months ago certainly changed his fortunes. Foreign secretary Shvam Saran said, on the infamous Friday, that Mr Matherani had already been recalled from

Enforcement Directorate will not hesitate to look wherever necessarv in its search for quilt. Here is a suggestion. Technology enables telephone companies to keep a record of all phone calls made. They should get a list of all calls made to Aniel Matherani on and to his personal mobile phones

Singh has told Parliament that the

Praise be to technology. If India Today had not taped its interview, and then broadcast it on television, it would not have had the impact it did. Print is cold beside the warmth of a live voice, and that is what viewers heard all through the day: a member of the original Baghdad Four narrating precisely how the oil-vouchers deal was done.

Here is the Big Denial: "I gave no interview to India Today.'

Hullo? We could always check out whether the voice of Matherani we heard on television was his real voice or not. A simple check should establish that.

The second sentence provides clarification: it was off-the-record.

in print, the interview is comprehensive; the questions and answers flow into each other. The meant to be conclusive: "I also completely and unequivocally deny that I said oil vouchers were allotted to Shri Natwar Singh during the delegation's visit to Iraq, as reported in the story. This is as brazen as it can

get. Matherani provided exquisite and unchallenged detail of how Natwar Singh virtually smuggled his son into the Congress delegation; how Andy Sehgal "accidentally" met them in Amman; how Natwar Singh arranged for them to stay at the Baath Party hotel, and took both of them to meetings to give the impression that the delegation consisted of six members rather than four, and implied that the delegation had a political component and an "eco-

harsh words about the

custodians of society. I have to

say that it seems that we are

asking the pimp of a whorehouse

to guard our female members of

the family so that nobody can sell

them to the place. All of us know

what brought this situation in the

country. I don't believe that you

guys in Bangladesh did not

notice from the beginning of the

bombing who are being killed

and what the leaders of the

parties in government are

saying. Until now (from Awami

League government) the

religious militants are killing the

people of secular hue.

enormous.

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.

Bomb blasts

The series of blasts have once again proved beyond doubt that the government is not ready to take any action against the extremist elements. People may ask themselves how could a government continue to be in power without doing anything to stop the killing of innocent people?

It's now apparent that the ruling alliance is not ready to rein in the extremist elements as their godfathers are part of the system. Under the circumstances, the international community should address the issue to protect the lives of innocent people.

The government's failure to protect innocent lives is tantamount to violation of human rights, because it's the duty of the government to protect Mobile culture

lives and property.

Ramen Roy

Mr. Ahmed's write up on how

technology has more or less taken over the lives of Bangladeshis today has two sides. Years ago I or anyone else wouldn't have dreamt of walking around with a mobile. The idea of getting in touch with friends and family easily and at any time was quite unthinkable. Today when members of my family step outside their homes to go to school, to work or to run errands my dear grandmother is relieved to know that if they are late she has a way of getting in touch with them to make sure they are well. Bangladesh is no longer a safe haven with crime rampantly high and the recent bombings leaving

a lot to be desired. In such a our parents, situation, grandparents and loved ones often worry about our safety and are concerned about our wellbeing. This is where that beast of a gadget is extremely handy.

During a traffic jam that has you stuck in a gridlock for an hour or more, you can easily call your family and let them know about the situation. Or if you find yourself in a predicament the mobile is quite handy in calling for help. Worse, if a relative is sick at home and needs immediate attention and you are outside the best way to get in touch with you is via mobile. If the same were to happen years ago you wouldn't hear of it until you got home or someone came to find you, both of which would result in loss of time to deal with the problem and may jeopardize the health or even lives of your

loved ones. In my opinion technology does

have its disadvantages. It has made our society more digital. We probably talk more with your family members over the mobile. via email etc. then face to face but the advantage of it is that it has made up more efficient human beings. It allows us to conduct meetings and conference calls during those unbearable traffic jams. It allows us to catch up with friends and families at any given time without being stuck within the four walls of our homes. The older generation is often against change having spent the most of their lives one way. But the fact is change will happen and when it does it is up to us to use it to our best advantage Zeenat Z. Syed

Way out of abyss In the fertile soil of our country do not take care of our land. The religious extremism of our country grew because we forgot to nurture our main crops, our human values, our sense of decency. I know that we are not ready to hear this now but we would be better off if we remember that foiling the extremism is not just a matter of

weed grows quite naturally, if we

law enforcement. Or, may be it is just a matter of law enforcement. Applying law to everybody, everywhere, all the time, without exception. Our judicial system has become a joke. Our bureaucrats have become our lords. Our politicians have become the dispenser of largesse to themselves and to their sycophants There is no respect for law. A way out of this abyss is possible quite easily if we start respecting our people. If we trust them they will rise to the occasion. They understand their

responsibility. Meaningful decentralisation of government is a must. The government has too much power at hand and that is ripe for abuse. Power should be distributed to the local government leaders who should be elected by the people. All locals judiciary and law enforcement machinery should answer to the local government in real sense. There should a legislative assem-bly in every district. Once the people have the sense of empowerment they will confront the extremism in earnest. right now the hapless bureaucrats are far removed from the people at large and completely clueless in their response to this national crisis. A. Islam,

Politics and religious militancy

I could not help writing about this.

Sorry, I cannot avoid using a few

Everybody knows how this religious politics was established in Bangladesh after 1975. And we are asking them to stop religious militancy. What a joke!

Gias Uddin On e-mail

Shahadat Chowdhury As a member of a band of

guerrillas that Shahadat Chowdhury inspired, motivated and moderated. I feel deeply saddened at not being able to attend his last rites. Could somebody take his place in the opposite camp and stop the ruthless and senseless carnage that is taking place all over Bangladesh these days?

May Allah rest his soul in

Abul Fazal Mohammad Abdul

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peace

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