

Police rounding up a top militant

It helps raise public morale

THE law enforcing agencies, particularly the police, must be commended for their success in arresting a big mastermind-type militant leader from Gazipur. The arrest also helped in preempting more attacks that he was planning to carry out. This proves that while one cannot predict how these so-called Islamists will act and what will be their next target, by seeking them out relentlessly and following the leads that are provided by arrested militants, the law enforcers can anticipate the future acts of violence of these people and freeze them on the track.

There is also the necessity, for the success of the law enforcing agencies, to sensitise the public on the need to be watchful and cautious and seek the help of the police should they see anyone suspiciously moving about or have any information of useful and revealing nature of a deadly plot. People's awareness and readywit and action, as were noticed in Khulna, provide a good example of how the police can benefit from participation of the common man in the fight against extremists.

A redeeming feature of the sad episode of these bombings that have taken so many innocent lives so far, is that, a large number of the militant cadres have been arrested. These people are valuable sources of information that ought to lead to the masterminds. Remember, we are yet to track down the masterminds, and it is worrisome that they are repeatedly escaping the dragnet quite successfully. There is urgent need for the intelligence agencies to gear up their human intelligence, capability in order that they can get real time information. This is all the more urgent given the report that one of the masterminds visited Bogra very recently, unbeknownst to the police.

To tackle the menace there is no alternative but to haul up the two masterminds -- so-called Bangla Bhai and Shaikh Abdur Rahman -- that are known to be directing the extremist operations. We are hopeful that nabbing of top-notch militant leaders will help not only raise public confidence and morale, it will also keep up the momentum of action against these elements till the masterminds are hauled up into the dragnet.

A cheery visit

Bill does his part, we need to do our own

BILL Gates, the world leader in IT development, has endeared himself to the Bangladeshis profusely, let alone firing the imagination of computer buffs in the country, by paying us a visit unperturbed by the recent bombing incidents in Bangladesh. If anything, this reflects a measure of confidence on his part in Bangladesh's ability to grow on a modernist course of development.

The offer, up-front, of a hundred thousand dollars for the development of our IT sector, especially for training up over ten thousand teachers and two hundred thousand students, is a most generous as well as timely gesture by him. We are also grateful to him for his most generous grant of \$15 million for the Asian Women's University in Chittagong.

In recent times there has been a considerable number of policy statements made by the government on IT development; numerous seminars have also been held on the subject and public displays staged of computers. But it must be said that there has not been any worthwhile development in infrastructure building which is pivotal to the growth of the technology. We are yet to see any comprehensive institutionalised effort in catching up with the rest of the world, especially the neighbourhood, in terms of accelerated development of the specialised sector. Today no sustainable development, whether social, administrative, management and economic can be achieved without integrating our systems with the IT technology.

Bill Gates has made his offer of partnership with us in the field; it is now for us to play our part with total commitment. IT is a technology that has many dimensions. Its functions are all-pervasive. In order to reap the maximum benefit from it we have to improve and modernise our telecommunication network as a first step forward. It is sad that we are still struggling with setting up of the undersea submarine cable, a vital link to modern day IT growth. Today India, our neighbour, is regarded as one of the leading countries in IT technology. Given the will, the determination and honesty of purpose we can also make our mark in the field. The inspiration Bill has given us by his commitment to continuing support for us must be built up on in concrete terms.

Awaking from slumber

SHAYAN KHAN

TO start with, let us not begrudge Bertil Lintner, author of the infamous article in the Far Eastern Economic Review a few years ago that got his magazine banned in Bangladesh, a smile today. We owe him and his magazine an apology. An apology draped in the shame that he, being a foreign journalist foresaw what was breeding underneath our surface before any of us could see. Or perhaps we saw it, but in keeping with our collective character, denied it to ourselves. The ban, like all acts restricting freedom of speech, certainly bore the marks of insecurity far more than of indignation.

But now we cannot deny it anymore, because the truth has hit us in the face, and it has hit hard. Lintner's prophetic words have hit home, and we are today a nation not simply affected by terrorism. We are ravaged by it. And we may be on our way to being ruined by it. But still we live in denial, attributing the present state of affairs to a narrow political dimension. It is imperative now that any effort to liberate Bangladesh from the clutches of the terrorism that afflicts it, focuses on the roots of the problem, rather than just look for a quick fix or even more abhorrently, use it as a political tool. Almost no other channel has been explored with the exception of political ideology. Much as this narrow perception restricted international efforts against terrorism in its early days, it restricts the Bangladeshi effort today. Terrorism is not just a political problem. It is the accumulation of political, social, and economic problems.

Just between us, we know that there are those amongst us some who, if not supportive of, are sympathetic towards, the cause of international terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda and Hamas. That is not to say we condone their methods, but that we share with them a common realization. That the people they claim to represent (the far-too-long oppressed Palestinians being the prime example) can have a better life, indeed should have a better life. For us it is a realization borne as much out of a sense of identity as of a spate of sympathy.

Religion is, after all, the most potent uniting factor of all, by virtue of faith being beyond judgement. In the grand scheme of things, the faith in question, be it Islam, Christianity, Judaism, etc is of little significance. What is far more important is that there is a common thread running through a particular segment of the population. As long as there is, the

Our battle against terrorism will not end overnight. It will span consecutive governments and generations. It is therefore absolutely crucial that our political parties, regardless of what else they agree or disagree on, unite in this fight rather than let it divide them.



An armed police stands guard during an anti-bomb protest by Islamist groups after Friday prayers in Dhaka.

words of almost any religion, particularly the ones which have seen the most bloodshed, can be manipulated to convince its adherents that it is justifiable to kill.

This is illustrated by the fact that all three monotheistic religions (and Hinduism as well) have had terrorist acts carried out in their name at various points in history. Today, we hear of Islamic terrorism. But that has less to do with Islam itself, than with the conditions in which Muslims live today. If faiths in all religions of the world were reversed today, with no change in the quality of life, it is a fair bet we would be more likely to be hearing of some other form of religious terrorism dominating the news. Anyway, we only have to deal with what is, and right now it is in the name of Islam that most terrorism is being carried out (excluding state terrorism, of course, which is beyond the scope of this article). But it is not only there that the similarities between terrorism in Bangladesh and international terrorism come to a halt.

There is, of course, a political element to terrorism. Ambitions of a new order, which almost all terrorist organizations from Al Qaeda to JMB harbour, can only be described as political. But political ambition is the reserve of only the top brass in any organization. Beyond them, all other members, particularly those on the periphery such as supporters, activists, and sympathizers, merely

believe or have been convinced to believe in its vision. They themselves do not entertain hopes of any political power. The willingness to sacrifice one's own life in a suicide bombing is verification of that. They are merely foot soldiers, much as voters are the foot soldiers of democracy rather than politicians themselves. Abdur Rahman may have hopes of leading Bangladesh under Sharia law, but Abul Bashar was willing to give his own life simply because he believed in a better life for his brethren under Sharia law. No top leader in any terrorist organization has readily given his own life for the cause. They need those at the periphery to fulfil those tasks which fall outside the scope of politics.

But where do they get the people to do their dirty work? Most often, they are recruited from the most marginalized sections of society. This holds true across all countries where terrorist organizations are based, and it is no different in Bangladesh. They are people who you reckon almost cannot be worse off, yet have no hope of being better off. People for whom the promise of a heroic death and glorious entry into heaven is too seductive in the face of a mundane existence and humiliating rejection from society.

In the poorest parts of a country such as Bangladesh, such prospects are almost too easy to find. Marginalization being the key, it is

growing inequality rather than absolute poverty that spurs recruitment into terrorist organizations. The corrupt state apparatus is seen to favour only those who are prosperous (and indeed, they are right in this) and is therefore quite predictably, the natural target. With latest figures showing rising national income only benefiting those who are already well off and not trickling down to those at the other end of the spectrum (in fact they have become even worse-off), the pool from which JMB draws its members is becoming even wider, not narrower.

Our two main political parties have responded characteristically, blaming each other, and ignoring the truth that the blame lies on the shoulders of every government that has ruled Bangladesh, certainly those in the last two decades or so at least. Terrorism is not the consequence of a few years of poor governance, but of a few decades. The twin towers of New York did not fall because of George W. Bush's ascent to the presidency in America, but because of 50 years of misguided American foreign policy in the Middle East. The deaths of Ivy Rahman, Rajib Barua, and Golam Faruq were not the natural consequence of the BNP's second term in power, but of the decades of misguided development policy that Bangladesh has endured since independence. I dare paint the grim picture that unless the Awami

League can look into this aspect, the situation will be no more better off under them. Leaving aside their tendency to shoot themselves in the foot, free and fair elections in 2006 will almost certainly see them gain power now, because the BNP has clearly failed again, but what is worrying is that the AL has so far only engaged in typical mindless banter in the aftermath of bombings, rather than given any indication of faring any better. The mud-slinging disease that has manifested itself in our politics for too long now seems by no measure to be waning. If this is all our political leaders will ever be good for, we can categorically conclude the terrorists will eventually win. Right now, it is only a large part of the picture, and that is a bad enough situation. In truth, the line dividing life in a strict, Talebanesque state and life in a democratic one where you are likely to be blown to bits at any time cannot be too thick.

The question has often been raised of how you know when you have defeated terrorism. When does the battle end? The answer is you don't know. Like dormant volcanoes, they can erupt at any time. Any country committing itself to fighting terrorism must sign on for the long haul, to a permanent fight. That is why any strategy to fight terrorism effectively must encompass the long-term picture. Sheikh Hasina has suggested that the government could have prevented the latest bombings, since it proved it can provide a secure atmosphere during the Saarc meet. A ridiculous argument, coming from a former and potentially future head of government. The massive security operation undertaken during the Saarc summit is logistically impossible in the long run. Just as importantly, the limits the operation placed on our civil liberties is something no country wants to put up with in the long run. That is not, and will never be the long-term solution. The solution lies in pursuing effective development policy, the harvest of which will be reaped in the long run through the creation of a harmonious, egalitarian society. And this has to entail:

- Regional development in economically backward areas spurring job creation and economic welfare for inhabitants;
- Decentralization of the economy away from just the existing one or

two prosperous centres, in particular Dhaka;

- Appropriate measures ensuring a more equal distribution of income and greater social integration, suppressing the "us versus them" mentality between different classes of society; and

- A vast improvement in governance restoring faith in the democratic process and precluding the need to venture into alternative, extremist avenues.

The requisite short-term measures include the fairly obvious beefed-up security, particularly for stated targets, and a massive drive directed at hunting down and raiding all terrorist training camps spread across different parts of the country in addition to greater border control. All these measures were ignored far too long in an effort to pose as "moderate" Islamic nation, as if that would ensure the longevity of the image we desire to portray. Even today, there is a false belief amongst the general public that we Bangladeshi Muslims are too moderate to go the Afghanistan way. To them, a reminder is perhaps due that the same Afghanistan which became synonymous with extremism under the Taleban was once not only a moderate, but rather a liberal Islamic state.

Our battle against terrorism will not end overnight. It will span consecutive governments and generations. It is therefore absolutely crucial that our political parties, regardless of what else they agree or disagree on, unite in this fight rather than let it divide them. Otherwise the work of one government cannot be carried on by the next. The track record of our politicians makes it almost certain that this will not happen, and so it may be that in addition to the measures outlined earlier, there is a need for an independent Terrorism Commission that operates above party lines. All that I deem necessary is admittedly unlikely to materialize in the framework of our rotten political atmosphere. There is too much bickering, too much partisanship, too much of an emphasis on self rather than public service. And that is probably why, as cynical and pessimistic as it may sound, we should all be pleasantly very, very surprised if we ever do see ourselves winning the fight against terrorism. But here's hoping against hope that someone will rise to the challenge and provide that surprise.

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Rise of militancy: Bangladesh under attack

MAHMUDUZAMAN BABU, BIPUL SHAH, ROBAET FERDOUS, GOVIND CHAKRABORTI, AUDITY FALGUNI, ABU NASER RAJIB, PARVEZ CHOWDHURY, SHAIFUL ISLAM, ROBIN AHSAN, MITHILA FARZANA, SHAMEEM AHMED, AND KISHOWER LAILA

BANGLADESH is under attack. The country today has been transformed into an inauspicious outpost of Islamic militancy and terrorism. It should not be presumed that this has happened overnight. Rather, the militants have been nurtured by the indulgence of the state, and now they have assumed such a proportion that they have challenged the constitution, judiciary, administration, and entire democratic system.

We are outraged, and worried about the future of this country. We are being dragged towards an inauspicious future by the bomb attacks starting from the Udichi conference in Jessore, Pahela Baishakh celebration of Shayanon at the Ramna Botomul in Dhaka and recently the successive suicide bomb attacks in Gazipur and Chittagong.

The militancy of Bangladesh got energised from the rise of militancy across the world. The international network and the financiers of the militants of Bangladesh are now an open secret. Per annum net-profit of religio-politics of Bangladesh is BDT 1200 crore.

We believe the prime cause of the rise of militancy is the unequal distribution of wealth that has generated poverty in the country. During the 34 years of post-independence, we have not noticed any political goodwill to remove the discrepancy between the rich and the poor. Most of the people of the country are forced to live a poverty-ridden and undignified life. Exploiting poverty, the greed-driven seekers of power are able to easily deviate the madrassah students, leading them to heinous militancy. Combining religious fervour with poverty, they are forming suicidal militant squads. Detached from modern, contemporary, and income-generating education, the madrassah students are mostly unfit for today's job market. Deprived children of poor families are, in fact, victims of the current education system. Their scanty employment opportunities cause frustration, and the interest-driven

political groups manipulate their frustration.

Progressive and democratic institutions of state-structure have been wrecked. Non-communal, progressive, and democratic characteristics of the political culture have gradually been sullied because of the military rule, introduction of state-religion, and the manipulation of religious sentiments. No political party wants to leave the opportunity to use religion as a weapon to grab power. In this milieu, religio-politics has gradually been organised and vehement militancy has gained grounds.

The militancy of Bangladesh got energised from the rise of militancy across the world. The international network and the financiers of the militants of Bangladesh are now an open secret. Per annum net-profit of religio-politics of Bangladesh is BDT 1200 crore. The government has no control over the Islamic NGOs. They

are misappropriating money in the name of bank, insurance, and hospital, utilising the religious sentiments of the people and also strengthening their fund. Moreover, Islamist terrorism has been encouraged. Militancy was inspired with slogans like: "We will be Taliban, Bangla will be Afgan" and further nurtured by the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Religious education has made its headway in geometrical progression during the last 34 years. The number of villages in Bangladesh is 84,000 and the number of madrassahs is 74,000.

In the last decade, the students in the primary schools have doubled; however, in madrassahs, the number has multiplied by 13 times. In the secondary level in the government educational institutions per capita state-run expenditure is Tk 3,000 while in government madrassahs it is Tk 5,000. There are 20,000 Qoimi madrassahs with 5,000,000 stu-

dents. But the government has no control over the syllabus, curriculum, or financial transactions. Not even a single line has been written about the structure of the system of education of Qoimi madrassahs in the Education Commission Report, 2005. We have observed the detrimental attempts of the politicians to win the election by exploiting the religious sentiments of the people, and that's why they have established madrassahs.

Bangladesh might be endangered if militancy grows with the pace as it has been growing very recently. No enlightened human can tolerate it. The following are some recommendations that we would like to put forward:

1. Stringent judicial system should be adopted soonest; the possible guiding force of the militants should be found out. Their international connection and source of funding should be blocked. Identifying

militant effort as National Emergency Issue, a national dialogue should be initiated soonest with the participation of all political parties and civil society.

2. All madrassahs should be incorporated in the mainstream education by carrying out reforms in all kinds of madrassahs so that they can compete in the mainstream job market. Steps should be taken for the overall educational reform aiming at the development of science against superstition and religious fanaticism.

3. Judicial steps should be taken to separate religion from politics.

4. Effective measures should be adopted to prevent corruption.

5. Socio-economic facilities and equal distribution of wealth should be ensured and widening rich-poor gap should be reduced.

6. Healthy competition and accountability should be established everywhere within the state. Above all, the growth of democratic, non-communal, and humanistic values should be nurtured.

This is a write-up of Torun Nagorik Uddug (Young Citizen Forum).

Revolt in the Shiv Sena



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

MR Raj Thackeray's revolt against his cousin and Senapati Bal Thackeray's son Uddhav is the Shiv Sena's gravest-ever crisis. Raj resigned from all Sena posts within days of the Sena's crushing defeat by former Chief Minister Narayan Rane in an Assembly by-election.

Until recently, Mr Rane was the Sena's most-rooted leader, with a base in Konkan. Like Raj, his inner-party battle was directed against Uddhav.

Mr Raj Thackeray hasn't directly criticised his uncle, who remains his

"God." But logic pits him against the Senapati. Mr Bal Thackeray anointed Uddhav as the Sena's "executive president" four years ago -- despite Raj's seniority and superior organisational capabilities.

Given Raj's marginalisation by Uddhav, especially in the last few months, a patch-up seems unlikely.

Raj will probably set float a "parallel Sena." He will be the fifth major leader to quit the Sena -- after Hemchandra Gupte and Datta Pradhan (1977), Chhagan Bhujbal (1991), and Rane. The pattern is well-established. You might be talented and loyal to the Sena. But if you don't get on with the Fuehrer & Son, you don't count.

Raj's Thackeray family connection only magnifies his revolt's impact. It's highly probable that the Sena will soon stop being a significant force -- in the Fuehrer's own life-time.

We must rejoice in the Sena's demise -- without feeling embarrassed. The Sena was the nearest thing to European fascism that India produced. For four decades, its goons played havoc with politics,

The Sena story is probably over. But the "Marathi Manos" sentiment and sense of injury the Sena cultivated within a chauvinist political space hasn't gone. It could well be exploited by others, including sections of the NCP or Congress.

the law, culture, sports, and the courts. They ruled India's largest -- and wealthiest -- city through blackmail, coercion, fear, and violence.

The Sena fomented religious hatred and communalised politics. Its demagogues manufactured chauvinist prejudice against non-Maharashtrians and instigated hate-crimes.

The Sena represents unadulterated evil. It concentrates much that's negative in Indian society, including ultra-conservatism, authoritarianism, and addiction to force.

Its disintegration will deprive the BJP of its sole Hindutva ally. That too warrants a celebration, as does the BJP's own crisis, aggravated by Ms Uma Bharati. Parties that reject India's multicultural, multi-religious heritage and the bedrock Constitutional value of secularism can only cause retrogression.

The Shiv Sena was created in

1966 by Bombay's industrialists as a counterweight to the Communists' growing trade unionism in "sunrise" industries like engineering, electricals, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals.

Sena goons would break strikes, disrupt union meetings, and beat up worker-activists -- especially the educated, skilled new migrants from the South, with Left-wing sympathies.

These were the Sena's earliest targets. Next came the Gujaratis and Muslims. However, it again returned to Southerners. When the anti-Babri campaign grew in the mid-1980s, the Sena became rabidly anti-Muslim.

The Sena was a tool in the hands of the Right. The Bombay Congress boss, SK Patil, used it to disrupt the 1967 election campaign of the Left-leaning VK Krishna Menon, who had been denied the Congress ticket.

The greatest resistance to the Sena's thuggery came from the Communists. Krishna Desai, CPI MLA from Parel, gave Left-leaning youths self-defence training. The police, he rightly believed, won't defend the Left against the Sena.

In 1970, Sena thugs hacked Desai to death -- Independent India's first political murder. They got away lightly under the deeply-compromised Congress. The Sena's politics of violence and murder came to prevail. Resistance to it got subdued.

The Sena's anti-unionism was supported by the Maharashtra government, which regarded "industrial peace" a higher priority than fundamental rights, even law-and-order. Without Congressmen like VP Naik, the Sena couldn't have grown. The Congress nurtured the monster. Later, the BJP boosted it.

Equally reprehensible were the

industrialists who financed and mentored the Sena. They formulated political strategy for Mr Thackeray. He demanded jobs for "sons-of-the-soil" and exploited the sense of inferiority and identity-loss among Bombay's Maharashtrian middle class.

Unlike other Indian metropolises, Bombay has never been dominated by one ethnic-linguistic group. The slogan of "neglect" of "Marathi Manos" evoked a response especially when jobs became scarce. The Sena-built cult of Shivaji helped consolidate Maratha power, and promote rabidly communal, illiberal, and macho ideas.

The Shiv Sena's historic role was fourfold: destroy working-class radicalism; infuse extreme intolerance into society and reverse Maharashtra's rich tradition of liberal social reform which began with Jyotiba Phule; institutionalise lawlessness and coercion; and,

push mainstream politics to the communal Right.

The Sena succeeded in imposing the first half of this agenda with the Congress's help and the second half through the BJP, especially after the 1993 Bombay pogrom, which it organised.

The Sena's greatest political gains, ironically, came not through its "sons-of-the-soil" appeal, but through OBC support in Marathwada and Vidarbha. The key here wasn't Mr Thackeray, but OBC leader Chhagan Bhujbal.

In 1995, the Sena for the first time took power in Maharashtra, in alliance with the BJP. Crucial to its success was the 1993 violence and the March bomb-blasts.

It leveraged its power to drive crooked deals and award "crony-capitalist" contracts, including tripling the Enron power project after promising to "drown it in the sea."

By 1999, the Sena was out of power. Politics took the back seat. Sena leaders had accumulated enormous wealth. Mr Raj Thackeray and former Lok Sabha Speaker Manohar Joshi bought

Kohinoor Mill lands worth Rs 350 crores.

The Sena had every opportunity to outmanoeuvre the shaky Congress-Nationalist Congress government which replaced it. But it failed. Its appeal shrank, as did the Senapati's manufactured charisma.

Eventually, Mr Thackeray went the way of all tin-pot dictators. He became a prisoner of a small coterie based upon family loyalties. His actions have produced repeated revolts.

The Sena story is probably over. But the "Marathi Manos" sentiment and sense of injury the Sena cultivated within a chauvinist political space hasn't gone. It could well be exploited by others, including sections of the NCP or Congress.

That would be a tragedy of historic proportions. One can only hope that Ms Sonia Gandhi doesn't repeat her mother-in-law's blunders of the 1960s, and that Mr Sharad Pawar doesn't emulate VP Naik.

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