

A disquieting revelation *Time has come for government to clean house*

THE facts could not be any clearer. Elements within the government have for a long time been sponsoring and sheltering the outlawed JMB and JMJB militants. This original revelation was reported in the media long ago and has since been corroborated time and again through confessional statements made during the interrogations of suspected militants.

The evidence suggesting such links is now so great and disquieting that it can no longer be plausibly denied, and the revelations of recently arrested JMB leader Lutfar Rahman are merely the latest in what now amounts to a mountain of substantiation

What is becoming clear is that, when it comes to the militants, the government has been pursuing a policy that can at best be described as extremely short-sighted, and at worst, utterly reckless and indefensible.

The evidence is incontrovertible that in response to banditry of so-called leftist groups in the north-west of Bangladesh, certain elements within the government took a decision to sponsor the rise of the militant religious groups to take up arms against those outlaws. This is how the religious militancy arose and how it was able to spread far and wide with relatively little check from the authorities.

Now that government's ill-fated policy of sponsoring vigilante justice has backfired disastrously and been exposed for all to see, the time has come for the government to first acknowledge its grievous error and then to correct it.

The first thing that the government needs to do is to follow up on the information that has been provided implicating members of the administration. If there is credible evidence suggesting someone in the government has a connection to the militants, he or she needs to be brought to justice, not shielded.

The government needs to publicly disassociate itself from those within its ranks who are soft on the militants. It should make clear that there is no place for such people in the administration. This will send the message to the militants that their virtual impunity is a thing of the past. The government must renounce and abandon the policy of tolerating the sponsorship and shelter of the militants, and take full action against those within its ranks who do so.

We demand zero duty on newsprint

Market monopoly by lone local industry hurting

THE ever-increasing price of newsprint is having a destabilising impact on the newspaper industry as a whole because of its economic untenability. The prices have shot up to Tk 49,000 per tonne within the last six months, with clear indication that it will go up further another Tk 6,000 at least.

This is an issue that cannot be separated from the question of the print media performing its due role of ensuring the public's "Right to Know" and living up to popular expectations.

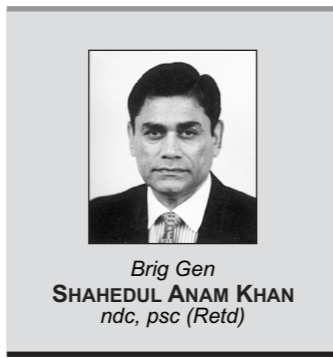
The import duty on newsprint in Bangladesh is much higher than what it is in the neighbouring countries.

The duty was imposed in the past to protect a public sector newsprint mill. But it has long gone out of production and the sole manufacturer of newsprint in the country now is a privately owned mill. The government announced a waiver on import duty, but with a caveat. It was made contingent upon purchase of a certain proportion of newsprint from the local producer. Since the local industry enjoys a monopoly they have raised the prices of newsprint arbitrarily thus rendering the whole idea of giving a waiver on newsprint import pointless. It is also unable to supply the total market need.

Now the message that we want to get across is very clear. We urge the government to withdraw the import duty on newsprint for the simple reason that it makes a mockery of protection to the local firm which is actually hijacking the benefits of the waiver by forcing the newspaper owners to buy the exorbitantly priced locally made newsprint.

The answer lies in breaking the monopoly of one private sector newsprint industry by having more mills in the sector to allow for a competition-induced improvement in the quality and reduction in the price of newsprint in the country. As things stand now, the government is virtually dictated to by the sole newsprint producer on a matter so crucially important to the print media. The playing ground should be a normal one for the print media with none enjoying any monopoly role as a spoiler.

Looking back at 2005



LOOKING back is easy. It is certainly safer than looking ahead, which is not only fraught with uncertainty, there is also a very good chance of being proved wrong about most of the utterances that one makes about the future.

But look back we must in order to be able to look ahead. For the wise at least it will afford a chance to remedy the follies of the past year. It is also imperative in order to determine why things turned out in the manner they did, and how are things likely to shape in future, although that is an entirely unwise undertaking, given the unpredictability of most things in Bangladesh.

Last year must surely merit as the 'annus horribilis' in so far as the domestic scene is concerned. The demonstrative actions of the Muslim radicals, through the 17th Aug bombings, the abrupt graduated scale in the suicide attacks, and the statements of the apprehended extremists, was shockingly poignant, causing the government to wake up from its slumber insofar as the issue of the extremists was concerned. The government's dynamics of denial reconfirmed in many minds the dynamics of dependency, which many think

was only inevitable because of the queer political partnership of the coalition government. The government was proved horribly wrong about the presence of the extremists in the country, and not only did it not ban the two organisations about whose activities it was so woefully 'ignorant' initially, it has now accepted that the acts of bombings and the suicide missions had been the handwork of the banned radical outfits.

For the nation regrettably, poli-

argument that one of the reasons the extremists have been able to sprout in our soil, apart from the socio-economic factor, is the rabid friction between the two major political parties. The extremists have made full use of the time and the political space provided by the conditions created as a result of this clash.

It was disappointing too to see the mutual blame game indulged in by the two parties that not only

ally accusing each other of treason.

But such lack of understanding in matters of larger national interest and security of the state is in stark contrast to the spontaneous concord of action of the members of the two parties when it comes to sharing government contracts and illegal largesse dished out as a part of the underhand dealings.

However, what has been proved beyond doubt is that our law enforcing and intelligence agen-

Indo-Pakistan relations and it is hoped that it does not turn out to be false.

Bangladesh relations with India continued on a sweet-sour note, more sour than sweet perhaps, although the former would have been more desirable. The causal factors for this state of relationship are the border issues and the Indian allegation of sheltering of anti-Indian elements in Bangladesh territory. This issue must be put to rest, once and for all.

across our borders like we did in the case of fibre optics submarine connection in the early 90's, which we are now establishing at many many times more the cost than what we would have had to.

Strategically too, the region was accorded an elevated status by the formalisation of special relationship between the US and India and Pakistan. What it will do of course, apart from serving greater US strategic interest in the South and Southeast Asia is provide huge market to its arms industry.

Iraq still remains the test case for the US "war on terror." Much of US efforts have been devoted to this issue. The US global war on terror continues but with a more besmirched reputation of its love for human rights because of its policy of rendition and slide in Mr. Bush's approval rating. No wonder he is imploring both his countrymen and the Iraqis to show more patience. While one hopes that the Iraqi election would bring some degree of normality in the country one is not certain whether that will provide enough stability to allow US withdrawal from Iraq. There are of course immense strategic benefits to US of its continued presence in Iraq.

While the war on terror continues the terrorists continue to deal in terror. Delhi, Bali Egypt, London show how little have the world succeeded in stemming the terrorists.

One wonders whether we have our strategies right?

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

It was disappointing to see the mutual blame game indulged in by the two parties that not only caused attention to be diverted from pursuing the perpetrators of the bombings, it must have infused them with renewed vigour to see these two at each other's throat and the nation at the mercy of the extremists. The call for a dialogue was rejected outright, but then the political parties viewed the whole notion of dialogue differently.

tics continue to be in the sate of flux. Discord between the two main political parties has only worsened the conflictual relationship between the two. There is very little consensus on national issues. The parliament has virtually remained dysfunctional with the ruling coalition unwilling to meet the demands of the opposition to allow it more time to talk in the parliament, and the opposition abdicating its constitutional obligations by keeping away from the parliament for greater part of the four years since the current parliament came into existence.

The discord has impacted adversely on the country's stability, its economy and national security. The fissiparous elements have exploited this void and have managed to strengthen their base, the manifestation of which we saw in the recent spurt of extremist activities. Very few can contest the

caused attention to be diverted from pursuing the perpetrators of the bombings, it must have infused them with renewed vigour to see these two at each other's throat and the nation at the mercy of the extremists.

The call for a dialogue was rejected outright, but then the political parties viewed the whole notion of dialogue differently. While the ruling coalition found itself out of its depth by the enormity of the problem, its underlying motivation was called to question when in the same breath the PM accused the opposition of being a part of the 'plot' against the country.

For the opposition accepting the offer of dialogue was like throwing a lifeline to the coalition, which it considered extremely injudicious politically. The narrow focus, compelling the stand of the respective parties was disappointing, since none seemed to be able to rise beyond its party interests, eventu-

ally capable of delivering if released from the shackles of political control. The large number of arrests including some high ranking leaders of the JMB, and seizure of huge quantity of raw materials for incendiary and explosive devices, has contributed in stemming the spree that these extremists had gone into between Aug 17 and Nov 2005. We hope that not only will these radicals be netted, the government will also apply all its resources in unearthing all the incidents of bombings that have occurred in Bangladesh, particularly since 1999.

Regionally, holding of the 13th SAARC Summit after being twice postponed was a matter of satisfaction. The third decade of its existence we hope will be a decade of implementation of the programmes that SAARC has conceptualised so far. And the agreement to implement SAFTA from first Jan 2006 is a good beginning. There is a new dawn in the

If there is a demand for joint examination of the alleged sites in our territory by India than Bangladesh has a point in asking for a third party presence in the exercise which I am given to understand is its position in the matter.

31st December is tomorrow and will be gone the day after, and with it will be gone our option to join the Asian Highway network. To accede or not to accede to the Asian Highway proposal have beleaguered the minds of our policy makers, and rightly so. It is our right to expect that the intercontinental road network would allow our entry and exit from and to third countries and not the same country, which the proposed highway would do.

Our position on the issue should be compelled by this demand alone and not the often-expressed underlying motivation of denying transit to India. Transit is a different ball game and must be addressed separately. Let us not miss the opportunity of surface linkages

'Faultlines' in combating religious extremism

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE extensive violence caused in recent weeks by the so-called religious extremists have surprised many and a polity that has not been used to such mindless violence accompanied by suicidal bombing finds itself in a perplexing state and are demanding instant solutions. The anguish and desperation are understandable. The question is, can we in the fitness of things as it obtains in our situation, expect a quick remedy. Some very spectacular recovery of firearms, ammunitions, explosives and the apprehension of some operational masterminds by the law-enforcing outfits raise hopes among the panic-stricken members of the public. At the same time irresponsible and motivated accusations leveled against apparently innocent folks give rise to doubts about the earnestness of the authorities concerned in properly handling the threat scenario.

Reactive postures and myopia

The only silver lining in an otherwise ominous scenario is that the denial mode insofar as the existence of the bigoted extremists is concerned has perhaps disappeared. The unfortunate part, however, is that as in other sectors of our national existence, we have been disappointingly reactive in responding to the threats of internal security. The whole approach appears to be ad hoc and on a case to case basis. Somehow, we want to assure

ourselves by imagining that a hydra-headed monster has surfaced all on a sudden and will wither soon to the relief of a concerned population. No wonder, therefore, that some of our incorrigibly garrulous politicians are confidently setting a time limit of two to three months after which the spectre of the so-called religious extremism and the bomb scare will be gone for good. One could only hope that such would

Islamic extremists have increased in its very nature thereby demanding changes in the strategy to counter it, are we ready to seriously study the problem, one may ponder. This is natural because we do not witness credible attempts being made to examine links between terrorist groups, the conditions in which they had spawned, the politician-militant nexus and other forms of patronage these groups receive, the

have not realized that in post-1975 Bangladesh, particularly during the last 25 years there has been a phenomenal growth of "Madrasahs" throughout the length and breadth of the country. At the same time many mosques have been built by organisations/groups about whose credentials much is not know. Was moral rearmament or spiritual renaissance the predominant factor behind such unusual

The imperatives

Most terrorist activities are encouraged and sustained by an ideological inspiration. In other words, terrorism is not divorced from ideology. One has to look for the said ideological moorings. In this quest, in Bangladesh, it is strongly likely that there will be some accusatory finger-pointing towards some political party. In the event of such a possibility turning into reality, the govern-

Preempting their nefarious activities should engage the uppermost attention of regulatory authority.

ii) The aforementioned surveillance should ensure that no one is allowed to interpret and propagate a distorted version of the holy books. Our inherently religious folks must not be allowed to be misled.

iii) The so-called religious extremists committing violence should be treated like criminals and no element of respectability should be accorded to them.

iv) Institutions not playing the national anthem and disrespecting the national language must come under adverse attention and be subjected to effective punitive measures.

v) Institutions imparting religious training and the Madrasahs should be a focal point for inspection and monitoring with a view to rendering their students into employable individuals.

vi) Last but not the least, as a nation, we must not suffer from any identity crisis as some mischievous quarters would like to. The Pakistanis thought we were lesser Muslims. Their 'Islamisation drive' resulted in a colossal tragedy. It is time perhaps to once again show our true grit and be in real elements. Our politicians must not be heedless.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Secretary and IGP.

As a nation, we must not suffer from any identity crisis as some mischievous quarters would like to. The Pakistanis thought we were lesser Muslims. Their 'Islamisation drive' resulted in a colossal tragedy. It is time perhaps to once again show our true grit and be in real elements. Our politicians must not be heedless.

be our lot. The facts, symptoms and indications, however, do not create an environment of optimism.

We may have to ask ourselves if a perception has developed among the terrorist groups that the Bangladeshi state is inherently incapable of meeting their challenge and that it has become soft and indolent. We may have to ascertain if quite a few parties have developed a vested interest in a soft state, a weak government and ineffective implementation of the laws. Simultaneously, are foreign funds flowing substantially to various organisations and groups which serve, willingly or unwillingly, the long term objective of some political parties suspected to be aligned or sympathetic to the regional or international terror network?

Since terrorism of the so-called proliferation of small arms leading to the growth of private armies etc. The question is, are we trying to appreciate all the factors that contribute to the 'quality and extent' of internal security threats? Another specific question could be whether our failure to deal with the terrorist crime are largely attributable to the inefficiency and corruption of the law enforcing machinery.

We have to know if the establishment has shown a great degree of indulgence to terrorist groups and if any covert sympathy has allowed the terrorist to cloak their methods in a garb of "Jehad."

The inactions

One will not be far from truth to say that posture wise we were not so conspicuously religious in pre-1971 times under Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Many of us

growth of religious institutions and places of worship? However, doubts would creep in as we do not see any corresponding healthy rise in public or private morality. So, the suspicion is that while the establishment, the civil society and other activists have remained in dark about the designs and programmes of the obscurantist elements, the so-called religious extremists have grown in strength and spread their tentacles taking advantage of the ignorance and inertia.

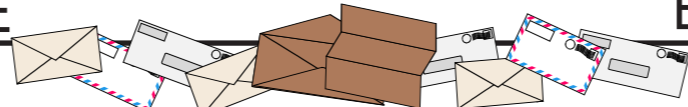
During the last four years when media, including international and national, have pointed to the potential danger, the authorities brushed it aside as another effort to vilify a democratic government. Now when the situation is becoming unbearable there is still not a serious well-thought plan to arrest and contain the menace.

ment of the day has to take tough actions without bothering about the political fallout. That would demand political sagacity of a very high order and may be a tall asking in our perilously polarised polity.

There is no doubt that the battle against extremism would be long. However, since the recent violence of the so-called religious extremists are a manifest attack on the long cherished values of the mainstream, our strategy and thought process should undergo substantial change in the following manner.

i) Persons or institutions having an apparent religious or ecclesiastical appearance and activity must not be out of bound for the surveillance agencies. Those creating credible suspicions must come within the ambit of threat perception and appropriate legal action shall be started forthwith.

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.

Negligent doctors

I could not just shrug my shoulders and accept young Shamsheer Mahmud's death (D.S., 23 Dec. 2005) as another example of 'negligence' by our local doctors. Even as a layman, I fail to understand how a cardiologist could think of subjecting a cardiac patient in utter distress to an Exercise Tolerance Test. We should not just let such incidents pass. I would hope that the Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) would initiate a thorough enquiry into the incident, not just as a whitewash of one of their community members. If found negligent,

BMA should cancel the licence to practice of the so-called doctor in question. Secondly, I would urge the bereaved parents to start a malpractice suit against the

doctor and donate the fine to a noble cause.

Distressed
On e-mail

Gulshan Park

The purpose of setting up Gulshan Park, originally conceived by planners in 1962, was to provide a fresh breathing place for the dwellers of Gulshan, Baridhara and Banani. The inhabitants of the area led by Gulshan Society along with environmentalists are constantly demanding creation of a green park. No doubt the place is ideally located for such a park.

The highest judiciary and the PMO have also expressed similar opinions. But the City Corporation is not paying any heed to the matter. The city father should honour the wishes of the people.
M M Aziz
DOHS, Baridhara, Dhaka

Defence policy

The news item, which was published for two consecutive days, attracted attention of many specially those who were attached with the Armed Forces. Yes, we do need a policy and it is overdue now. Anything done in haste and haphazard manner cannot bring the desired results and ultimately proves costly and futile. The Defence Policy is supposed to be a part of broad national policy, which should be intertwined with other policies.

Defence is so vital a thing for the country that it should not be left to a particular depart or group to handle it. It was very interesting to note from the news item that the Defence Policy of other nations is being looked into. The factors that decide Defence Policy is peculiar for each country, where economy, resources, geopolitical situation and above

all the will of the people will dictate the policy to be adopted. One should remember that the Defence Policy should not constitute the wishes of a few individuals.

In order to achieve this all political parties, the civil society, experts not only in Defence but in other fields like economics, foreign relations, science & technology should participate and their views given weightage so that it reflects the aspirations of the nation. The policy once formulated should have backing of the nation so that with the change of the govt. it does not change.

Once the policy is formulated, the military commanders and the associate other organs will implement the policy which may take years but will have a solid standing and will incur no wastage of our scarce resources. I hope and I am sure that the mem-

bers of the committee entrusted with the task are fully aware of the importance and gravity of the mission. The nation expects a good job from them.
Commodore AMA Alam (Retd.)
BN
New DOHS, Dhaka

Endless blame game

Our politicians talk too much and pass objectionable comments. They always blame each other whenever they find an issue. On the issue of recent bomb blasts the leader of the opposition alleged that the government is doing all these to shift people's attention from the recent price hike of essential commodities. While commenting on the "Hindu suicide bomber" the minister concerned said it was a hint of emerging Hindu fundamentalism in Bangladesh.

Those comments simply depict

a dismal picture. The party in power feels relieved by shifting the responsibility to others.
Istiaque Uddin Rifat
RUET

Asian Highway

It appeared in a news report of The Daily Star on Dec. 26, 2005 and also in the past, that Bangladesh would be a big loser in economy by not signing the Asian Highway Agreement under ESCAP, but it is not clear why the press is trying to justify the signing of Asian Highway Agreement on the ground of economic benefit although it would push our neighbour Myanmar 500 miles away from us, which is now only a river crossing distance. i.e. the river Naf. It may also be noted that a regular border trade exists between the two countries since long and it is witnessing a steady growth and

benefiting both the countries.

If Bangladesh accepts the ESCAP proposed route, the said border trade will be stopped as the commodities have to cross 500 miles through India to reach Myanmar and vice versa. Moreover, that would need permission from India, the possibility of which is bleak as it has been experienced earlier while Bangladesh tried to obtain permission for a route transit through India, just 15-20 km distance, to send commodities to Nepal and vice versa. It was refused by India despite the requests from both Bangladesh and Nepal.
A.K.M. Fakhru Alam
Siddheshwari Lane, Dhaka

Politics

I believe that a large majority of the population is thinking why the BNP is so stubbornly clinging onto its alliance with Jamaat. Day

by day the Jamaat link to militants is becoming clearer. In fact, Nizami, the Ameer of Jamaat-Islami, happens to be a person who actively opposed our liberation and was part of the despicable Al-Badr regiment. And the same person is now part of our liberated government!

But the BNP and the AL are engaged in the blame game, while the militants are getting away with heinous crimes right under their noses. In addition to that, the BNP is protecting Jamaat like a mother protecting her guilty child. The party should consider expelling Jamaat immediately, because our security is more important than clinging onto power. Otherwise, our democracy will be at stake.
A citizen
On e-mail