

Outlaw attack in Natore

Lying low exacts its price

THIS was a major act of banditry of an outlawed group whose activity had been on the wane for sometime past. Forty men armed with sophisticated weapons swooped on a thinly-manned police outpost, some 30-kilometres off Natore town on Wednesday afternoon overpowering it completely. In the process, three guards were finished off. They had obviously a dual purpose: taking a booty in arms and ammunition to replenish their cache of weapons and announcing their turf presence in a show of defiance of authority. Both the objectives were served.

Police stations and camps in the outlying districts, as it is, remain vulnerable with extremely limited manpower and a low equipment base. And if such a high dignitary as the prime minister should visit a place in the current state of security alert, even that much of low surveillance and enforcement capacity at the local police stations would be partially diverted to reinforce security arrangements for the PM. Perhaps this has to be done, because local personnel are better acquainted with local conditions; that is exactly the reason why the regulation manpower strength and arsenal at every police station must be increased. This is a lesson the authorities can draw from the latest attack on the police outpost at Singra zapala.

But there is a bigger moral of the story, and that must sink in our mind to take things into grip. This brand of rabid violence and defiance of authority taking the name of a radical group called Sarbahara smacked of a reappearance syndrome with implications that must not be lost on us. It is to counter the radical groups clandestinely and violently operating in the south-western region that the JMB was said to have been nurtured by the administration at one time and there lay its genesis, according to serious observers.

With the JMB growing as a Frankenstein and the government being called upon to administratively deal with them (how successfully they are coping with it is perhaps another matter), the other kind of extremism of the so-called left revolutionary mould has taken advantage of the government's distracted attention to be resurfacing like they did on Wednesday.

Another danger in the confusing scenario is you can't readily tell one extremist group from another. Surely, the government can't lie low and its job seems doubly cut out.

Mobile courts against food adulteration

A system must be put in place

THE mobile courts are back in operation – on public demand, so it is understood. While the revival of the courts is welcome, we still seem to be grappling with the problem on an ad hoc basis. That this is no adequate answer to the problem is borne out by the very return of adulteration in full force which basically made some members of the public demand a mobile court in the prelude to the Eid-ul-Azha. Which is why it is there again.

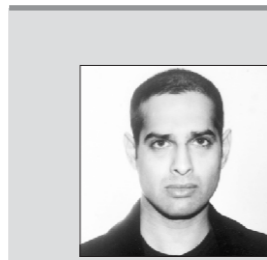
Admittedly, the raids and the random actions taken against the adulterators by these courts have had a positive impact, but our observation is that the evil is too entrenched to be eliminated through seasonal raids.

Food adulteration is a deep-seated social crime influenced by multiple factors. Mere raids against "suppy outlets and caterers" will not ensure a change in the culture. We need to keep an effective tab on the entire food supply chain down to the recruitment of manpower in shops and factories from the point of view of public health concerns. On the other hand, the authority vested in these mobile courts is simply inadequate. They cannot by themselves deter the perpetrators from committing the heinous act.

The government should therefore formulate a comprehensive long-term policy to deal with all such cases of food adulteration. At present the courts are lodging cases under the provisions of multiple acts like Food Act, BSTI Act, Environment Act, so on and so forth. All this is bound to create opportunities for the alleged violators to slip through the conflicting and self-contradictory loopholes of law.

The food authority, DCC, BSTI, environment department and home ministry must put their heads together to have a system in place for a sustainable containment of adulteration. In the meantime, the mobile courts should be empowered to close down operations of defaulters for periods ranging from one to three weeks including raising the ceiling on fines and penalising them with jail terms.

Highway robbery



ZAFAR SOBHAN

SO here we are again. Back in April 2004 when the landmark treaty was signed between 23 countries to complete the 140,000 km Asian Highway that runs from Tokyo to St. Petersburg, Bangladesh was left on the outside.

At the time, we were confidently assured by the government that the treaty could be signed at any time before the end of 2005, and that Bangladesh would sign as soon as we had successfully negotiated our proposed route from Myanmar through Teknaf as part of the Asian Highway network.

I wrote then that this was highly unlikely to happen, because at no time had Myanmar agreed to this southern route being included in the network, and that in fact the road that was being contemplated for the route remained largely unbuilt.

Well, it is a year and a half later. The southern route still has not been agreed to, and we are now once again reduced to going to Escap (under whose auspices the project has been undertaken), cap in hand, to beg for a special extension to sign up to the agreement.

What good such a special exception will accomplish remains unclear, since the chances of the southern route being included in the Asian Highway network remain as remote as they ever were.

Chalk this one up as another embarrassing diplomatic failure on

the part of the government due to its poor grasp of international affairs and its even poorer grasp of basic economics.

The fiasco is reminiscent of the Bimstec free trade negotiations, where we were again initially left out of the original signing of the agreement, because we were holding out for compensation for the loss of import duty that would accompany the arrangement. Eventually, and embarrassingly, we had to back down and sign anyway.

In any event, the point raised by

bright spots in the economy over the past few years, making it much harder for small businessmen and independent contractors to afford mobile phones (at a time when the mobile phone companies had been slashing their rates to increase their customer base).

The up-luck in economic activity that would result from more people being able to afford mobile phones was sacrificed. In addition, since the government collects tax on each phone call made, the smarter revenue model (that has been employed

it is this neglect of hard policy debate that has in large part contributed to Bangladesh's relatively anemic development and the stubborn resilience of the various social and economic problems that we face as a nation.

We are simply not having the kinds of policy debates that the country needs, and as a result the policies that are ultimately enacted are largely ad hoc, not well thought-out, and often bad for the country, with little or no fall-out for those who enact them.

STRAIGHT TALK

Bangladesh's objection to Indian transit calls into question our involvement in the entire Asian Highway project, which is premised on the benefits of opening up transportation networks transnationally, and if we do not resolve our issues with granting India transit rights, the network will eventually simply bypass us, and we will be left on the outside permanently.

Bangladesh with respect to Bimstec free trade was an absurd one. It is not persuasive to, on the one hand, complain about the flooding of the local market by imported goods, and then, on the other hand, try to argue that the economy would implode if we had to sacrifice the revenue generated from import duties.

The whole point of a freer regional trading regimen is that it will boost our exports, which should more than make up for the revenue loss from the reduction in import duty. If this is not the case, then we should really stop complaining about our balance of payments deficit, and think about financing the government entirely from import revenues.

On a domestic level, there was the decision in the last budget to slap a Tk 900 tax on sim-cards for mobile phones. This tax has had the effect of retarding the growth of the mobile phone market, one of the

in every other country around the world) would have been to encourage the sale of as many sim-cards as possible, and to collect revenue on the back end.

Policy making in Bangladesh is littered with examples of similar imbecility. Sadly, the political debate in the country almost never focuses on such issues, but rather on issues such as who declared independence, and now who is to blame for the terrorist threat.

This is not to say that these are not important issues that have their place and need to be debated. The rise of religious extremism, especially, is an issue that urgently needs to be discussed in the political arena right now.

But the inevitable casualty of focusing on such issues to the exclusion of all others is coherent and cogent economic policy that is well thought-out and enacted in the public interest. One could argue that

It is imperative to shift the focus of debate in this country from abstruse issues such as who declared independence to debating a policy agenda that would govern how we address the challenges faced by the nation.

The Asian Highway fiasco shines a useful spotlight on the backward thinking of the current administration and their limited grasp of policy matters.

The main reason that the government objects to the existing route is that it remains hostile to the notion of India having transit rights through Bangladesh. The reasons for not granting such rights remain utterly specious -- it would be in Bangladesh's national interest to do so -- and in any event, signing up to the highway network would not grant India automatic transit rights.

What the government fails to see is that the issue now is no longer just India. It is a question of Bangladesh

being a conduit between India and south-east Asia and southern China, and beyond. The advantages that would accrue to Bangladesh from being at the centre of this regional transportation network are obvious and immense (most recently extolled by the ADB).

On a visit to the Thai foreign ministry I made earlier this year I learned that Thailand, Myanmar, and India were building a tripartite road that would transport goods between India and Thailand, but that the road bypasses Bangladesh

because of our opposition to Indian transit.

India, for its part, is busy building another network of roads in the north-east that will ultimately bypass Bangladesh, even though this adds over 500 km to the route from the north-east of India and beyond to eastern India, and is costing an astronomical sum of money to build.

The southern route for the road network that the government has been pursuing will not come into being for the simple reason that Myanmar opposes it. The route runs through the country's sensitive Arakan region, which the Myanmar authorities do not wish to open up to transnational trade.

When the road is complete, it will be useful for trade between Myanmar and Bangladesh. But neither Thailand nor any other country will be permitted to go through to Bangladesh through the

southern route. Nor is Thailand much interested. It is mainly interested in India trade, and is busy building the tripartite road in furtherance of this objective.

China, too, has nothing to gain from the southern route into Bangladesh, and is perfectly happy with the northern route. China and the countries of south-east Asia are mainly interested in the Indian market and would like nothing more than access to India through Bangladesh, as this is the quickest and cheapest route.

But Bangladesh's continuing recalcitrance on permitting India transit rights through Bangladesh is now having the effect of damaging our relations, not only with India, but with China and south-east Asia as well, and will in the long-run cost us untold sums of money due to the economic opportunities lost.

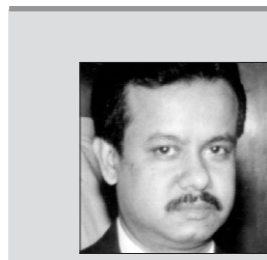
Basically, Bangladesh's objection to Indian transit calls into question our involvement in the entire Asian Highway project, which is premised on the benefits of opening up transportation networks transnationally, and if we do not resolve our issues with granting India transit rights, the network will eventually simply bypass us, and we will be left on the outside permanently.

The bottom line is that the current administration's short-sightedness and amateurish grasp of economics and international affairs has completely derailed our involvement in a project with unlimited potential for the national good, and has the added detriment of making us look ridiculous in the eyes of the world due to our backward thinking.

Nice work, guys.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

New law of attraction



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF you watch iron pellets being drawn towards a magnet, it tells you how it works when we talk about attraction. Why do people feel attracted to each other? What brings them together? What holds them together? In order to mark the first week of legalised civil union in the UK, celebrity singer Sir Elton John exchanged vows last week with David Furnish, his lover of 12 years, a filmmaker, who also happens to be a man. Once, the law of magnets worked for people, attraction between opposite poles and repulsion between like poles. Now it's a different story. There is a new law of attraction.

Or is it but an old law put in new force? The same sex attraction was always there. Men liked men, women like women, not as friends but in a funny kind of way. Li Yinhe claims that historical records show almost all emperors of the Western Han Dynasty had lovers of their same sex. In ancient Greece and Rome, adolescent males often paired-bonded, engaging in frequent homosexual relations, and exhibiting great love for each other, until the time came to become fathers and husbands. Even today for example, homosexual acts as late as age 17 are considered innocent in Cameroon.

We have had sissy men in the past and we have them now. Likewise, tomboys who were masculine girls have been found at all times. He-woman, she-man, flip-sides of each gender, but from time to time it has been branded as a shame. More than anything, that shame has been done away with in some countries by the sanction of law. It's now perfectly legal in those countries for man to fall for man, woman to fall for woman. Attraction, in all its permutation and combina-

tion, is no longer considered the hallowed preserve between a man and a woman. Exception no longer proves the rule. It's the rule today.

So in the West, men and women can get married to their own kinds. Perversion until some years ago, it's now just a matter of choice. But there is more to this knee-jerk liberalism, this freedom of choice, this right to be the way one wants. It is finally the recognition of hormones, that the book of biology is as good as its contents.

The new reality has changed the law of attraction. Like-minded people have always associated with each other, fallen in love, made friendship and kept in touch as normal, healthy progression of life. What we have now is an additional feature. Like-bodied people can feel attracted as well, something which doesn't make sense to us, some-

thing which disgusts many, flabbergasting others. Variety is the spice of life, and attraction varies from life to life. What it takes to tick between two people, may not click between others. Jean Paul Sartre was a philandering man, although he possessed no physical beauty. Nearly all of his girlfriends were initially repulsed by his ugliness, but then all of them eventually succumbed to his blandishments, seduced by his quicksilver intellect,

rest of Europe. Citizens came to gawk at Saartjie "Sara" Baartman, a young southern African tribeswoman exhibited in a cage. What attracted the crowd was not only the naked body of the 20-year-old woman. According to John Short, a professor at New York's Cooper Union College, it was the large derriere and distended labia of the corset that gave white women her high busts, rounder hips and exaggerated proportions of their own. People often go to ludicrous extent to become attractive. They wear gawky dress, speak in affected accent, develop mannerisms, and adopt bizarre lifestyle, all to impress others to get attention. Many people undergo face-lift, others go through callisthenics, diet control, and austere beautification so that they can get some attention.

her dead husband. In the United States slave owners ran their business on the principle of cattle breeding. They impregnated black women on their plantations to breed more slaves to fetch manifolds their investment.

Percy Bysshe Shelley explained that love was that powerful attraction towards all that we conceived, or feared, or hoped beyond ourselves. If you extrapolate these words, then hatred is but repulsion to all that we conceived, or feared, or hoped beyond ourselves. Relationships come either in love or hatred. Strangers don't have to worry about these things.

Birds of a feather will always find one another. Romantics, idealists, zealots, the world is full of many vibrations. It is the change in vibration that changes the equation, which changes professions, possessions, power and position. If the brainy was respectable once, the brawny is respectable today. If the virtuous was respectable once, the vicious is respectable today. If the intelligent was respectable once, the clever is respectable today.

All of these are the outcome of one thing, and one thing only. The law of attraction is changing. If you have watched the flies being drawn into the fire, that explains the new law of attraction. It draws all alike in mind or body -- homosexual, heterosexual, theist, atheist, devout, debauched, enlightened and benighted. Filmy people are plunging into passionate intensity. The magnets don't pull them anymore. Let me tell you why. There is no steel in them.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

If relationships are music then attraction is its notes. Every person is an instrument that plays this music in unison with one or more instruments leading to resonance, consonance or dissonance. Society is an orchestra, which must harmonise these instruments to create redolent music. Attraction builds relationships, relationships build societies and societies build history.

ardent language and increasing fame.

Good looks, riches, shapely bodies, comely manners, character, intellect, gifts of talents, the recipe for attraction is as diverse as any two individuals. Like they say different folks, different strokes. While good looks and money are common denominators, women are more attracted by successful men, and men are more attracted by beautiful women. There are those who are attracted by intellect. Lots of people fall for smooth talkers. Sometimes kindness can play cupid between two people. Then it also can be common ideology, profession, struggle, or enemy, which draw people to each other.

In 1810, there was a bizarre case of attraction that mesmerized London and Paris, radiating into the

death Baartman's sexual organs were preserved and displayed in a Paris museum until 1985. In 2002, the French government returned her remains to South Africa, with apologies.

Lisa Jones has raised an intriguing possibility in her book *Bulletproof Diva* that Baartman's notoriety was partially responsible for the rise in popularity in Europe of the corset that gave white women her high busts, rounder hips and exaggerated proportions of their own. People often go to ludicrous extent to become attractive. They wear gawky dress, speak in affected accent, develop mannerisms, and adopt bizarre lifestyle, all to impress others to get attention. Many people undergo face-lift, others go through callisthenics, diet control, and austere beautification so that they can get some attention.

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History changes when relationship changes because the law of attraction changes. Ideologies have evolved in the tension of these changes, in the struggle of relationships amongst class, caste, gender, profession, religion, race, and nationality. In the medieval Russia peasants were chattels and landlords exchanged them for cattle. In the Indian society women were once expected to die in the pyre of

country has made an anti-people bad law, should we have to do the same? The previous government made black law in the name of public safety act; the present government has also made a similar black law in the name of speedy trial law. The United States has a similar law related to eavesdropping, but the government or any government agency cannot arbitrarily tap telephones of any citizen. Prior permission from the court is needed to do so. The permission is granted if the court thinks that there are enough reasons for tapping telephone of any citizen.

Please don't misunderstand us. We are not against making tough laws to deal with extremism. All criminal activities, including extremism, must be resisted in a democratic society preserving constitutionally recognised basic rights. We consider the new amendment as a black law since it lacks any safeguard. For this

Cancel new tele-tapping law

State cannot intervene private life

ROBAET FERDOUS AND ABU NASER RAJIB

THE government has announced a new year's gift package for the people of the country. But the gift is not for all! It is only for those who have telephones. It is something like 'buy one, get one free!' Those who have cell phones or land phone connections will get this reward. The gift is that your phone will be monitored by the government apparatus. The government is going to enforce a tele-tapping law from January 1, 2006. The President in an ordinance on 12 December declared the law. Nobody knows how long this law will remain effective.

The Presidential announcement was made after an amendment of the Telecommunications Law 2001 including the provision for eavesdropping that was approved by the cabinet. The amendment was put into force through an ordinance since the parliament was not in

session. The amended law empowers the Ministry of Home Affairs to tap telephones. The provision was absent in the original law of 2001. Under the new law, the government may delegate power to officials and persons working in intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies to record or prevent conversation of any user of telecommunication services and collect information in this regard for the sake of state security or public order. The law empowers the Ministry of Home Affairs to take all necessary measures.

In spite of what has been said in any law, the 97 (2) sub clause of the law says that the government may withhold or amend any charter, order or licence or service provided by operating organisation under the law for a certain period if the President declares the state of emergency or for the sake of state security and public order as considered by the government. Although operating organisation mean pri-

The ordinance is not only contrary to basic rights, but also against civility since it will hamper day-to-day activities of the people. The law violates the clause 29 of the constitution, and hence it is to be cancelled. The clause 29 prevents the state from making any law that contravenes basic rights.

vate land and cell phone organisations, the law did not make it clear.

The law does not say how long the provision for eavesdropping will continue. In a television interview, Law Minister Barrister Moudud Ahmed said that the law will remain effective for a certain period. He did not say how long will be that certain period. Will it continue until the end of the tenure of the present regime? Did not previous civil and military government monitor telephone in the past? Of course they did. The difference is that the unethical measure has been legitimised this time.

Please note the time of the promulgation of the ordinance. The ordinance was announced when the opposition has been agitating

against the government. The ordinance legitimised eavesdropping when several newspapers reported that telephone conversation of opposition leaders is being recorded. We are suspicious about the real intention of the government for amending the law in haste with the excuse of curbing extremism without waiting for the next session of the parliament. The parliamentary session was prorogued just a few days ago. Our suspicion deepened since law makers were not involved with the formulation of the law. The people of the country have right to know what laws the government is preparing for or against them. We think that the government has shown the lack of integrity through the imposition of the law to

some extent in a secret way.

The government side said that the amendment was necessary for curbing extremists. Almost everybody alleges that our intelligence agencies do not run independently. So, it is understandable how much success will be achieved through the amendment if the present practice is not changed. Intelligence agencies say that extremists use cell phones to organise their operations. But three hill districts are not under cell phone networks. Still, bombs exploded in 63 districts, including three hill districts, simultaneously on 17 August. This shows that extremists are not operating their network through cell phones only. Undoubtedly, they have their own

system of communications also.

We apprehend that the law will be abused more than any other law, because intelligence agencies have been given arbitrary powers. Check and balance is the main spirit of any law so that a single agency does not hold the absolute power. But the new law which comes in force from 1st January 2006 gives unlimited authority to agencies under the Home Ministry to curb individual rights. As a result, people can be harassed for political reasons or intentionally. Speaking in favour of the ordinance, three barrister ministers, Moudud Ahmed, Nazmul Huda and Aminul Huq, claimed that many countries in the world have similar laws. If any

reason, the law is a direct intervention into private life of citizens and a clear violation of human rights. The government can make a new law if it thinks it needs a tough anti-terrorism law.

The ordinance is not only contrary to basic rights, but also against civility since it will hamper day-to-day activities of the people. The law violates the clause 29 of the constitution, and hence it is to be cancelled. The clause 29 prevents the state from making any law that contravenes basic rights. As a result any law that is not compatible with basic rights will be considered as redundant. We, therefore, demand immediate cancellation of the law that infringes individual rights.

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