

Shaikh in custody at last

Popular urging triumphs, moderate image bolstered

THE entire nation is relieved at the news of the arrest of Shaikh Abdur Rahman, one of the most wanted leaders of the outlawed JMB. The infamous Shaikh was taken into captivity with considerable tact and caution reflecting a high degree of professionalism on the part of the law enforcing agencies involved. But for the tactful and well-thought-out strategic raid, the entire operation could have ended in a fiasco. This arrest will go some way in restoring the dwindling confidence in our law enforcing agencies and at the same time dispel people's concern about the overall sincerity of the government in dealing with the prevailing situation arising out of countrywide terrorist acts.

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But let's not lose sight of the fact that popular pressure to hunt down the masterminds and perpetrators of the unprecedented and hitherto unheard-of phenomenon of near-simultaneous bombings across the country and the spontaneity with which public cooperation was forthcoming in ferreting out the militant leader played a crucial role in booking him at long last.

It is basically a reflection of our national psyche for and an inherent commitment to building and consolidating a society of moderation and tolerance that has triumphed -- for all to see. This should help erase any trace of doubt in any mind about our country's and people's ability to defend the values of a free, moderate and tolerant society. Bangladesh's image should be that much higher now.

With this landmark arrest, given continued combined efforts of the people, vigilance of all political parties, a determined political will of the government and the tenacity of the law enforcing agencies we should now be able to haul up not only the infamous Bangla Bhai, alias Siddiqui Islam, but also succeed in unearthing the mystery surrounding the rising spectre of militancy in the country over the past several years.

But the real work has only just begun. So long as the extremist networks and resource bases are not fully demolished and the tentacles they have already spread inside the country completely neutralised, we must not rest on the oars of some isolated successes, however inspiring they may be.

Power outage insufferable

Authentic demand-supply analysis warranted

THE root cause for a deteriorating power supply deficit wreaking havoc on our lives, as perhaps never before on the current scale, doesn't lie in lack of funds even though this is the much-touted reason making the rounds. Evidently, more as an excuse than any plausible explanation for what we deem to be a human, more precisely, a patent management failure.

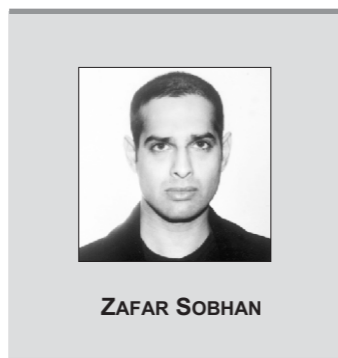
First and foremost, there is warped, a hugely unrealistic assessment of the demand-supply situation. Whereas the power generation capacity in summer is between 3300 and 3600 MW for the whole country, the demand is shown at around 4200 MW. In reality, it hovers around 5000 MW. As for the Dhaka city, on Wednesday, the deficit ran into 1800 MW but it was underestimated at 1400 MW. It is not any rocket science to miss the obvious that with such erroneous, underestimated, baseline calculations of demand, PWD and DESA will make a mess of any semblance of rational power distribution.

The tragic part of the whole story is, in the last five years demand for electricity has grown by 2500 MW compared to just 80 MW worth of increase in the generation capacity over the last three years. The structural deficiencies are too glaringly mirrored in the simple statistic that out of 65 power generation units, as many as 34 are as old as 20 to 30 years.

When that is the uninspiring perspective, pledges and assurances have been held out at regular intervals raising hopes for an improvement round the corner that never happens. For instance, 12 projects were planned to be taken up for commissioning between 2003 and 2006 to raise the generation capacity by 2200 MW which would have eased the deficit considerably; but alas! they remain on the wish-list into the terminal year of the targeted deadline.

When will these projects ever get implemented? What a track record in the power sector the ruling coalition is facing the next general election with!

Time to get back to business



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

For anyone who cares for the country and for the right to live free of fear, the decimation of JMB would be cause for celebration in and of itself. But let us also not overlook the benefit of removing the terror threat from the political calculus. The continued spectre of terror in the background has permitted both government and opposition to pay less than merited attention to the other, and dare I say more pressing, issues of the day.

Nevertheless, the law enforcement authorities are to be commended for the efficiency and professionalism of the operation that nailed Rahman and also for the fact that the terrorists have not been able to strike for the last three months.

The success of the law enforcement operation to capture Rahman suggests that the anti-extremists within the administration are slowly gaining the upper hand in the government's intramural battle, and that the supporters of the extremists within the administration who had been instrumental in sponsoring and sheltering them are finding themselves increasingly isolated.

There is no question that this is a good sign, both for the country and for the ruling alliance. The benefit to the nation at large lies not merely in the fact that we can now expect the JMB terror threat to have diminished considerably, in itself cause for relief and celebration, but that freeing ourselves from this concern that at one time threatened to become all-consuming permits us to turn our attention to the outstanding issues on which we need to be focused in an election year.

We have plenty to concentrate on, plenty of crises that need desperate and immediate atten-

tion, without having the additional and uniquely dire threat of terrorism that is aimed at the destruction of our democratic polity and the creation of a theocratic state to deal with.

The issue of election reform (and perhaps care-taker government reform) is finally being addressed in parliament, a development all the more welcome for the fact that what is really at stake in these discussions being held under the rather anodyne rubric of "reform" is the continuing functionalism of our democracy.

At a more nuts and bolts level, the economy, even though macro-economic fundamentals remain in fair shape and GDP growth is expected to remain strong, is experiencing a number of shocks that have already had a disproportionately negative impact on the rural economy and the working classes and that threaten to plunge the country into full-blown crisis over the next few months.

Frankly, we do not have the luxury to subordinate all of our other concerns to dealing with terror as an all-encompassing and singular threat to our nation's well-being.

The sooner that terror can be taken off the nation's agenda, so that we can get back to the business of lifting people's standard of

living and erasing the inequalities that have helped give rise to the terrorism in the first place, the better.

The timing of the economic distress that is now showing signs of taking hold of the rural economy could not be worse for the administration. Despite the government's many missteps over the past four and a half years, the economy has, by and large, done reasonably well. There have been areas of under-performance, such as steep inflation in the price of essentials, especially in the north, that have hurt select constituencies, but the malaise is now set to hit its five-year high.

The current crises in power, fuel, and fertilizer are creating a perfect storm in the agricultural sector and rural economy that could do far more to harm the reputation of the administration among the voting public than the rise of the terror threat during its tenure ever did.

The fact that the brewing crisis within the agricultural sector is coming at a time when the prices of essentials continues to spiral out of control has the makings of a serious problem for the government.

The government's inability to provide power, fuel, and fertilizer

to farmers in a timely manner has ensured that there will be a serious short-fall in boro production this year. The fact that farmers have been reduced to breaking into fertilizer depots, barricading roads, and besieging local government offices, and that more than ten were shot dead in January in Kansat when they had the temerity to demonstrate for a stable supply of electricity to be able to operate their irrigation pumps and threshing machinery should be giving the government far more cause for concern that it has done so far.

Dismissing the very real hardships that millions of farmers are now facing as fabrications of the media and the opposition is both appallingly insensitive and politically suicidal.

If the boro harvest fails to meet expectations, as is now virtually assured, due to the government's high-handed, tone deaf, and incompetent handling of the situation, then millions of rural households will find themselves in enormous difficulty within a few months, the nation's foreign currency reserves will be depleted due to the need to import vast quantities of rice from abroad, and the inflationary pressure on essentials will continue to rise.

The short-fall in water and electricity that has already crippled the country will only get worse in the summer months ahead, when the gap between supply and demand of electricity is estimated to reach 1,800 megawatts.

I am not even sure whether this estimate takes into account that 2006 is a World Cup year and that electricity consumption is sure to spike from June 9 to July 9. Even

if the nation didn't really bat much of a collective eye-lid over the shooting dead of protesters in Kansat, I can assure you that if anything gets in the way of their World Cup viewing that that will make people sit up and take notice, if not to the streets in protest.

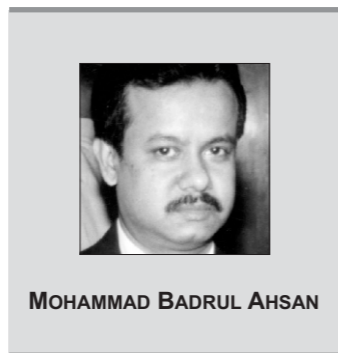
There is no doubt that the capture of Abdur Rahman is the best news for the country in a long time. I sincerely hope that it will soon be followed by the capture of JMB's operations commander Siddiqui Islam and the remaining members of the group's executive council, and that the JMB terror threat can be completely and thoroughly extinguished.

For anyone who cares for the country and for the right to live free of fear, the decimation of JMB would be cause for celebration in and of itself. But let us also not overlook the benefit of removing the terror threat from the political calculus. The continued spectre of terror in the background has permitted both government and opposition to pay less than merited attention to the other, and dare I say more pressing, issues of the day.

Because, make no mistake about it, aside from terrorism, the country right now faces very serious threats to its well-being, and we all need to get back to the business of creating a healthy and functional democracy and economy without any further delay.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Let us talk



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

Come head to head, heart to heart, soul to soul-two sparks of eternity, two blips of humanity, two charges of electricity. Let us knock, let us talk. Seize this moment, speak your mind. Let us not worry, cruel or kind. Each day goes, silence grows. If we are fire, words are smoke. If we are serious, life is a joke. We wane and words wax. Let us talk and let us relax. Life is a maze like bird in a cage. It lasts as long as it takes to erase.

COME and sit with me head to head. Let us talk about life and death. Let us talk about length and breadth. Let us talk about suffocation and breath, let us talk about sickness and health. Let us talk about hearth and health, let us talk about thorn and wreath. Let us talk about nightmare and dream, let us talk about whey and cream. Let us talk about dearth and plenty, let us talk about riffraff and gentry. Let us talk about cold and heat. Let us talk about entry and exit.

Let us talk about lost and found, let us talk about square and round. Let us talk about noise and sound. Let us talk about courage and fear, let us talk about far and near. Let us talk about front and rear. Let us talk about hope and despair, let us talk about baldness and hair. Let us talk about high and low, let us talk about friend and foe. Let us talk about anything, let us talk about many a thing. Let us talk about light and dark, let us talk about jungle and park. Let us talk about philoso-

phy and math, let us talk about love and wrath.

We need to talk no matter what. We need to talk whether we stand or squat. We need to talk whether we run or walk. We need to talk whether we fizzle or spark. We need to talk whether we believe or not. We need to talk whether we grow or rot. We need to talk whether right or wrong. We need to talk whether weak or strong.

We make lot of noise, but not enough choice. We speak a lot without any voice. We argue a lot, but don't understand enough. We look at the peak, but live in the trough. We look for light in darkness. We look for slim in thickness. We look for depth on the surface. We read our souls on the face. Come and sit with me. Let us talk about bird and bee. Let us talk about plain and pleasure, let us talk about trash and treasure. Let us talk about past and future. Let us talk about fusion and rupture.

We need shock to knock on our soul. We need aim and vision to

reach our goal. We need to look before we go. We need to see before we show. We need to deserve before we desire. We need to work before we retire. We need to sow before we reap. We need to grope before we grip. Let us sit down face to face. Let us talk about joker and ace. Let us talk about modesty and shame. Let us talk about ingominy and fame.

We need to talk why thieves thrive, scoundrels strive and depraved drive. We need to talk why the wicked choose and the innocent lose, why the insincere prevail and the sincere travail, why the devious rule and the devout growl. We need to talk why man is hollow, mind is shallow, head is callow and heart is yellow.

Tell me why rich lie, poor die, innocent cry and guilty fly. Tell me why some sell honor and others keep it. Tell me why some cringe and others hit. Tell me why some are shy, others defy, some defeat, others retreat. Tell me why some sweat and others wait, why some

fast and others feast, why there is angel, why there is beast.

I want to know why plants grow. I want to find why some are blind. I want to understand why some pretend, others defend, many intend, few withstand. I want to know why fireflies glow, turtles are slow, rains fall, and crocodiles crawl. I want to learn why the world turns, heart burns, and river churns. I am eager why fox is clever, dogs bark for ever, lions roar and eagles soar. Come sit with me. Let us talk about plant and tree. Let us talk about fruits and flowers, let us talk about seeds and showers. Let us talk about stars and moon, let us talk about sugar and spoon.

Come talk to me head to head. Let us talk about life and death, let us talk about want and wealth, loss and gain, sunshine and rain. Let us talk about beginning and end, let us talk about straight line and bend. Let us talk about greed and need, let us talk about sloth and speed, let us talk about caste and

creed. Let us talk about bank and money, let us talk about milk and honey, bribe and bunny, cloudy and sunny, sad and funny.

Let us talk about today and tomorrow, let us talk about joy and sorrow, lend and borrow, bow and arrow, wide and narrow, hawk and sparrow. Let us talk about knowledge and ignorance, wisdom and arrogance, sin and penance, stammering and eloquence. Let us talk about paddy and husk, face and mask, toil and task, dawn and dusk. Let us talk about faith and God, let us talk about even and odd, pea and pod, reed and rod.

Why does it snow, I must know. Why does it rain, try to explain. Why it is hot, tell me you big shot. Why it is cold, don't ask me to hold. Tell me quick, before I speak. Tell me now, before I row. Why some birds walk, others fly? Why some men laugh, others cry? Why are there the earth and the sky? Why do people live and die? Why flowers bloom, dreams doom and dangers loom? Why some smother, others bother, go away and come together?

Life is strife, death is rife, pain is pervasive, pleasure is evasive, come and go, fast and slow. Come to me and think, drink and sink. Let us go from link to link, let us go from brink to brink, let us expand, and let us shrink. Blood boils, body cools and mind roils. Spasm in muscles, chasm in heart, aching bones, groans and moans, beginning and end, earn and spend, bring and send, damage and mend. From

womb to tomb, from dust to dust, what begins with love and lust, you and I, let us try. Come to me head to head, speck and speck to gather and spread. You and I, born to die, flesh and blood, water and mud, now and then, ink and pen.

Let us talk, idle and senseless. Let us talk incoherent and endless. In the end, all that patter doesn't matter, because gain is vain, sacred is profane, preservation is decay, excuse is okay. In the end knowledge is ignorance, forgiveness is vengeance, near is distant, change is constant. In the end, you and I cherish, you and I perish. However, nothing lasts forever.

Come head to head, heart to heart, soul to soul-two sparks of eternity, two blips of humanity, two charges of electricity. Let us knock, let us talk. Seize this moment, speak your mind. Let us not worry, cruel or kind. Each day goes, silence grows. If we are fire, words are smoke. If we are serious, life is a joke. We wane and words wax. Let us talk and let us relax. Life is a maze like bird in a cage. It lasts as long as it takes to erase.

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Implications of India-US defence pact

The recent US-India defence pact may have serious implications for the arms race and raise strategic questions regarding relations with China. China-India-Pakistan triangular relationship is a vital factor for South Asian peace. If India-China relationship deteriorates due to increasing US interest in Indian affairs, Bangladesh will be in a difficult situation as to whom to support -- India or China. US. Our defence, economic, and technological capability should certainly improve rapidly to make our country self-reliant. We also need to develop mutual trust and confidence with other neighbours of the region.

ABMS ZAHUR

THOUGH an ally for a long time, India voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meetings twice, apparently to: (a) strengthen the US-India alliance, (b) legitimise India's nuclear weapons, and (c) obtain great power status, and perhaps on sudden realisation of the virtues of nuclear electricity.

However, things do not appear to be as smooth or inspiring as it seems. With growing rhetoric and possibility of a confrontation, Indian government is becoming increasingly nervous at the reference of Iran to the Security Council to abandon its nuclear plans. However, US has realised that UN sanctions on

Iran may be possible only through tough diplomacy. US considers Iran as "central banker" for global terrorism, a partner with Syria in destabilising the Middle East, despite the claim of Bush administration that its "war on terrorism" is successful we hardly see any sign of it.

On the contrary, she is destroying the economy of Iraq, killing innocent Iraqi civilians and demolishing a large number of historical sites. In its striving to control firmly Iraqi oil, the recent destabilisation of oil market is seriously affecting the growth of developing countries, particularly the non-oil producing least developed countries. In Afghanistan, the common Afghanis appear to be in favour of withdrawal of UN forces from their soil. In Pakistan, it is not

certain as to how long Pervaz Musharraf will be able to contain the growing anti-US feeling.

Even if we assume that Iran has secret nuclear ambitions, other members of the UN perhaps do not have the moral right to object. After all, Pakistan, India, and Israel have built the bomb. If these countries can get away with their atomic arsenals, why shouldn't Iran? There is no morality that enjoins that India, Pakistan, and Israel can have nuclear bomb, but not Iran. The fear that Iran will eventually dominate large parts of the Middle East appears to be rather speculative. The fact is that US desires to remain dominant everywhere.

The growing closer relation between India and the US may not

help establishing the envisaged peace in South Asia. Neither can it be overlooked by China or Russia. India may lose its image as a sober, neutral, and peaceful country. This will encourage her small neighbours to develop closer relationship with China.

US-South Asia relationship vacillated between "close embrace and uneasy distance" for the last five decades. Bangladesh-US relationship was not friendly at independence, it started changing with the visits of presidents Zia and Ershad to the US. A number of developments between 1990s and the early 21st century helped in strengthening of US-Bangladesh relationship. Among these developments were Bangladesh's participa-

tion in US-led Gulf War coalition against Iraq, US assistance to Bangladesh to recover from devastating cyclone in 1990, and the first ever visit of a sitting US president (Bill Clinton).

In 2003, former US Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that "Bangladesh's democracy, Bangladesh's economic progress, Bangladesh's friendship and Bangladesh's people do matter to the US." Pakistan is already an ally and strategic partner of US. The other prime object of US attention is India. The US wants India to undertake regional responsibilities commensurate with its growing power. The strengthening of Indo-US bilateral relations will have implications for Bangladesh and other countries in South Asia. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, US attention to Bangladesh is because it is a democratic moderate Muslim country as compared to Jordan, Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other US allies in the Muslim world.

It would be relevant to discuss in this regard about Bangladesh's present relationship with China. Because of very rapid growth of China (average around 9 per cent

over the last two decades, the US is showing concern. China has consistently a diplomatic strategy with two basic goals: to maintain a peaceful environment conducive to its economic development and to minimise the scope for the US and its allies to slow down China's rise. It has its own set of strategic interests to prevent rise of any peer or competitor or rival in Asia. It particularly seeks to keep India's power and influence confined within its borders and to enhance China's influence in South Asia.

China regards Bangladesh as having the potential to facilitate its security interests in the region. In fact, Bangladesh can play a vital part in promoting Chinese interests in the regional order. It can connect south western China with South Asia by a land route. Bangladesh along with Myanmar can provide Chinese access to the Bay of Bengal and to the Indian Ocean.

Both India and the US consider Bangladesh-China present relationship at acceptable level. However, within a decade or so, Bangladesh will have to reassure them that it is not siding with China against India. The signing of Bangladesh-China

defence cooperation agreement has, however, raised suspicion in India as to its scope and intent. For strategic reasons, Bangladesh will have to be more attentive to China's political goals and show deference to its geo-political interests, views, and values. Once South Asia comes within China's sphere of influence, the situation would render China a power in South Asia too, and make its participation in any regional forum, security or otherwise, inevitable. If the US continues to prosecute its unproductive, indefinite, and costly war on terrorism, its economic power as well as its capacity for leadership may attenuate, resulting in the erosion of US political and military role in the Asia-Pacific.

The recent US-India defence pact may have serious implications for the arms race and raise strategic questions regarding relations with China. China-India-Pakistan triangular relationship is a vital factor for South Asian peace. Bangladesh's internal security situation has become worse. The Islamic extremists are conducting repeated bomb raids. The government response to

deal with them is inadequate so far. If India-China relationship deteriorates due to increasing US interest in Indian affairs, Bangladesh will be in a difficult situation as to whom to support -- India or China.

As we see from our experience during the last five decades or so, China has proved to be a very trusted ally. Thus it may be a folly for us to damage or destroy our relationship with China to satisfy either India or the US. Our defence, economic, and technological capability should certainly improve rapidly to make our country self-reliant. We also need to develop mutual trust and confidence with other neighbours of the region. Our policymakers must carry out a true socio-political study to determine exactly the loss and profit for our people.

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