

War of the mosques

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WHEN is the moment you realize your country is on the brink of disintegration? Perhaps it is when you are too scared to remain in your own home. That's the way it felt to Muhammad Ali, a 27-year-old Sunni in Baghdad's mixed Shia-Sunni neighborhood of Doura. In the hours after a terrorist bomb in nearby Samarra destroyed the sacred Askariya mosque -- where revered Shia imams are entombed -- angry Shiites, their faces wrapped in kaffiyehs, roared down Ali's street in Opel and Kia passenger cars bristling with AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades. Minutes later, Ali heard three loud blasts: a nearby Sunni mosque had been hit with RPGs. "We were terrified," says Ali, his voice cracking. "We never had something like this in my neighborhood."

Early the next morning a friend came by Ali's house with a blunt warning: "Get out." A half kilometer away, the friend said, he'd come up on a large field bordering railroad tracks, a place where kids normally kick around a soccer ball. Now it was littered with the victims of Shiite reprisal attacks. "Sometimes people throw their heavy garbage in this place," says Ali (not his real name, which he fears would make him a target if published). "Now they are leaving bodies. It's unbelievable." Braving a harrowing dash through militia checkpoints in a taxi, when AK-47s were waved in his face, Ali brought his mother, two sisters and brother to safety at an uncle's house in a Sunni-dominated area. There they remain, frightened and waiting for what comes next -- fearing both the known and the unknowable.

Iraq could be on the verge of degenerating from a barely managed quagmire into something worse. US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad says the nation seemed as close to civil war as it had ever been. "We're not completely out of danger yet," he said on Saturday. Rising to the crisis, President Bush on that same day telephoned seven key Iraqi leaders, including interim

Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari and Shiite alliance leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, as well as two influential Sunni politicians. The president urged them all to continue trying to form a government of national unity. But even Bush, who tends to put the best gloss on things, declared that "the coming days will be intense."

Iraq's brief reign of terror was further proof that the nation's 200,000-odd security forces -- which witnesses said did little or nothing to stop the violence -- are simply not ready to maintain stability. Over the weekend US forces were sent out to patrol Baghdad neighborhoods, helping the Iraqis to loosely enforce what one soldier called an "inshallah" (God willing) curfew that prevented large crowds from gathering until afternoon prayers. In the Baghdad neighborhood of Shula, a Newsweek reporter accompanied three Humvees from the 10th Mountain Division as they rolled up and down narrow streets, their antennas hitting low-hanging power lines. Overhead, an unmanned aerial drone scouted for crowd gatherings, and when one was spotted, the US troops drove to the area, blasting a message in Arabic over a loudspeaker: "Attention, attention, the Iraqi government has a curfew for your safety until 4 p.m. From 4 to 8, you may go to prayer. The president of Iraq urges calm. Thank you for your attention." But even with the extra protection, killing was underway. An Iraqi soldier who was standing guard in the neighborhood, Thaeer Kadar Abbas, said that two people were murdered overnight, and four young men were kidnapped and executed "just 30 minutes ago." "In this neighborhood, that's a normal day," Captain Greg Stone told Newsweek.

The worst spasm of violence came immediately after the Askariya bombing on February 22. Shiite militias attacked more than 20 Sunni mosques, destroying one and inflicting damage on six more, according to US Army Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, and they murdered several imams. Other accounts put the totals higher. Bands of gunmen killed at least 120 people across the country -- including 46 demonstrators, both Shia and Sunni, who had

protested against the Askariya bombing and were pulled out of cars and shot. Even Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the pre-eminent Iraqi Shiite leader who is usually a calming presence, issued an angry statement saying that "if government security services can't provide protection, then believers can with God's help." Talks over the formation of a new government, which had lagged since mid-December parliamentary elections, had broken down.

Still, after a day of reprisals, everyone seemed to pull back from the brink. Jaafari imposed a shaky daytime curfew that held during Friday prayers, providing some evidence that the interim central government was not entirely helpless. The prime minister and Hakim also called for unity, as did the powerful radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr (although his Mahdi Army militia was believed to be responsible for the worst of the reprisal attacks). Jaafari said all damaged mosques, Shiite and Sunni, would be rebuilt with government money. Hakim, probably the most powerful politician in Iraq, pointed a finger at the likely culprit in the Askariya bombing, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, head of al Qaeda in Iraq. "This is what al-Zarqawi is working for, that is, to ignite sectarian strife in the country," Hakim said in a statement broadcast by Iraqi television stations. "We call for self-restraint and not to be dragged down by the plots of the enemy."

Why the change in tone? In part because Iraqi party leaders who had been cavalierly indulging in sectarian politics suddenly found themselves "staring into the abyss, and they were recoiling," says a US official in Baghdad who would speak only if he were not identified. "You looked into the eyes of these officials, and it looked like they had been scared straight." Those feelings were summed up at a meeting that Khalilzad attended a day after the attack with some 60 of Iraq's leaders. The meeting was boycotted by the dominant Sunni alliance, the Iraqi Accordance Front. But one Sunni leader who did show up, cleric Ahmed al Samarra'i, was almost moved to tears, says the US official, who was there. "His

voice was cracking, and he was half crying when he said as a person from Samarra, the shrine was an Iraqi shrine, not a Sunni or Shia shrine."

What US authorities hope is that existential fear will act as a bonding agent, making clear to Iraqis just how dangerous foreign jihadists like Zarqawi are -- and how awful civil war would be. After Jaafari tried to extend the daytime curfew into the weekend, imposing a 24-hour vehicle ban in Baghdad and its suburbs, security began to break down again. On Friday night and Saturday, Sunni insurgents seemed to be getting their licks in. Two rockets were fired at a Shiite mosque in Tuz Khurmatu, north of the capital; a car bomb exploded in the Shiite holy city of Karbala, and 13 members of a Shiite family were gunned down.

Even so, weekend violence was not as severe as what occurred in the first hours after the Askariya attack. "Iraqi security forces have control over all parts of the country," said a senior Bush administration official, who did not want to be named because of the sensitivity of the subject. She added that, after Bush's phone call, representatives of the Sunni bloc agreed to show up at a meeting of political leaders at Jaafari's residence Saturday and recommit itself to forming a new government.

Some US officials insist that as bad as things are, the nation is still on a more positive path than it was in some previous periods of turmoil, like the siege of Fallujah in April 2004. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice complained to reporters last week that "every time there is a patch of turbulence, someone writes, 'It's all over, they've had it, they'll never get this done,' and what happens is the Iraqis go through a period in which they come back together."

But each round of sectarian violence tears a wider hole in the community fabric, as seen in the breakup of Shia and Sunni neighborhoods like Muhammad Ali's. That in turn makes all-out civil or sectarian war likelier the next time. And ordinary Iraqis seem to have less and less faith in the interim



PHOTO: AFP



government of Jaafari, already reeling from accusations of running or permitting Shiite death squads. In Baghdad, there were no reports that government security forces ever confronted members of Sadr's Mahdi Army, which is beginning to resemble Hizbullah in fractured Lebanon. This inability or unwillingness to stop the militias (Iraq's security forces are dominated by Shiites) was one reason cited by the Sunni bloc for withdrawing from political negotiations.

Yet Khalilzad is fighting to maintain his influence on the country's political direction: both Jaafari and

Hakim blamed him for inciting the violence by threatening to cut off US aid for "sectarian" groups two days before the Askariya mosque bombing. And US officials admit they don't have any good ideas as yet for dismantling the militias or integrating them into the national forces. During Friday prayers, a cleric loyal to Sadr, Aws al Khafaji, announced that his boss had ordered the formation of a security committee to coordinate activities of the Mahdi Army. "Our enemies are not only those who hate Shiites," Khafaji said. "But also the occupation that allowed takfiris (extremists) to enter

the holy shrine and demolish it. We want the occupation troops to leave our country. This is our main demand."

Ironically, the Shiite militia menace has led Sunni communities once sympathetic to the insurgency to ask for more US military patrols, said one senior US official in Washington who spoke on condition of anonymity. And that could imperil US withdrawal plans, which call for a reduction of US troop levels to below 100,000 by the year-end. "Yes, it is worrisome," the US official said with a sigh. "But almost every issue you could raise is

worrisome." (c) 2006, Newsweek Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

Bangladesh leading the way

In spite of the passage of so many years even now from February 21, 1952, hundreds of thousands of people all across Bangladesh begin expressing their unremitting respects to those who had made the ultimate sacrifice so that a people could be counted as a nation, and a free one at that. Languages are instrument of heritage, identity and nation building. That is why language is an emotive issue, as it is central to the existence of a people and to their definition of who they are, who they want to be, how they wish to be identified.

SABIHUDDIN AHMED

FEBRUARY 21 is a very special day, specifically because fifty-four years ago a number of young people of what was then the eastern part of Pakistan, led by the valiant students of the University of Dhaka, wrote a new chapter in the history of mankind. With their valour and blood they asserted that it is an inalienable right of a people to speak in their mother tongue.

From that initial protest against myopic attempts to subjugate a people linguistically, culturally, politically and economically, flowed the unrelenting struggle that ultimately triumphed with the birth of Bangladesh, a struggle which in the final stages had to be an armed fight by an essentially peaceful nation.

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Language can also be used to subjugate and divide a country as was done in then Pakistan and in South Africa, through the imposition of Urdu and Afrikaans that led to the students' and people's revolt in then East Pakistan in 1952 and youth uprising in South Africa in 1976. The fires stoked then ultimately resulted in the independence of Bangladesh and

demolition of apartheid in South Africa.

In order to preserve the cultural heritage of humanity and in recognition of the sacrifice of the students for their mother language Bangla in 1952, the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1999 declared February 21 as International Mother Language Day. In a world of Globalisation, where a few languages take priority, the UN and UNESCO sought to protect and promote linguistic diversity and multilingual education.

Fifty-four years later as a direct consequence of what happened on that crisp February day in Dhaka City, International Mother Language Day is now a universally observed occasion for peoples around the world. It is a day which reaffirms that every culture has the right to nurture, promote and preserve itself in all its manifestations.

It is the immense diversity of the human race that makes the world such a wonderfully colourful planet. Because of this diversity mankind has been able to enrich civilizations with unique blends of songs and poetry, dance and music, paintings and sculptures throughout the millennia -- a veritable tapestry of the aspirations and history of all the ages.

Certainly, human history is one of constant change. As has been said long ago, the only constant is change. This is, of course, both a boon and a bane. Consequently, over the years many languages have been lost and some are petering out of existence. At one time, there were between seven and eight thousand distinct languages. Now, it's estimated, very few speak most of the six thousand known languages around the globe.

Therefore, wouldn't it be a

shame and a tragedy if nearly 3,000 of these mother languages become extinct as Prof. Stephen Wurm who spoke some 50 languages himself, has described in his compilation "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Extinction." It falls upon us, as heirs to the collective wisdom of our ancestors to preserve this heritage. And such initiatives can bring results as one such example has shown. Cornish, the mother language of England which is said to have become extinct in 1777 has been revived through recent efforts and now over 1,000 persons speak the language.

Linguists therefore have a frenetic task on their hands as they try to document the remaining languages especially because half of today's languages have fewer than ten thousand speakers and, more alarmingly, a quarter have less than one thousand only. The loss, to put it simply and factually, would be irreparable.

While I am here, I cannot resist the temptation of submitting to you a few realities about my country. It is of course a fact that Bangladesh is not the most successful land on earth and has, perhaps, more than its fair share of natural calamities. If you live outside Bangladesh you're very likely to be left with the notion that that's all it is good for. The reality is rather different.

Bangladesh is one of the few countries that has already attained three of the Millennium Development Goals, which are to be met by 2015. It has by this year reached the goals of primary school enrollment, gender parity in education, and access to safe drinking water.

Then there is the recent report by the United Nations Development Program. It said, inter alia, that Bangladesh demon-

strated it is possible not only to sustain strong human development across a broad front even at relatively modest levels of income growth but also to graduate into the medium developed countries category in the Human Development Index. The UNDP representative went on to declare:

"Over the past decade Bangladesh has been a leading light in improving human development and should seek to lead the way for other countries as the world looks to achieving the Millennium Development Goals." No mean achievement for a land that is host to over 140 million people in an area of merely 144,000 square kilometers.

Since 1975, the report said, Bangladesh has steadily improved life expectancy, education and the standard of living. And for the first time, it continued, Bangladesh has overtaken India on reducing infant mortality, one of the key indicators of the Human Development Report. Evidently, victories over adversities, defying the odds and proving the prophets of doom wrong are very Bangladeshi characteristics. So it has been for eons and so it will be for ages to come.

Seeking your indulgence for a brief while more -- and to drive the point home while I have the floor -- let's take a quick look at another report. The World Economic Forum, last year for the first time, made an attempt to assess the current size of the gender gap by measuring the extent to which women in fifty-eight countries have attained equality with the other gender in five critical areas, namely, economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being.

And the finding? Bangladesh emerged ahead of such countries as Italy, South Korea, Malaysia and Thailand, and on top of all

Muslim-majority nations surveyed. On a scale of seven, where Sweden scored the highest with 5.53, Bangladesh scored 3.75, trailing mighty Japan by only 0.01 point while other countries in South Asia, including Pakistan and India were distant followers. Definitely something to shout about even at the risk of sounding immodest!

But let me return to the topic of the day, i.e. language. Given the extent of confrontational attitudes in today's world the importance of respecting various cultural identities assumes more urgency than, maybe, ever before. And what's equally important to remember, as all right-thinking people certainly do, the right to expression in any language comes with obvious responsibilities.

To ignore this reality, which includes the reality of being sensitive to the rights of others, is not only another surefire method of evading responsibility but in truth is another definite way of engendering despair, anguish and disruption in civilized coexistence, a coexistence that has permitted the flowering of so many varied ways of living in so many different cultures which in turn has allowed the growth of so much great literature and art.

Consequently, it is obvious and essential as well that all attempts to preserve and promote mother tongues will serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity, but it will also create a fuller understanding of linguistic and cultural traditions. This will result, without a doubt, in generating better solidarity among different peoples based on understanding, tolerance and continuous dialogue -- an imperative in present-day world if ever there was one.

Sabihuddin Ahmed is Bangladesh High Commissioner in the UK. This piece is an edited version of a speech given by him at the University of Ulster.

ASIA 2015 Promoting growth, ending poverty

Asia, in partnership with the international community, has a real chance of eliminating absolute poverty in a generation. That's more than 600 million people, currently living on less than a dollar a day, whose lives could be measurably improved by clean water, access to basic healthcare and a host of other services that we in the UK take for granted. But if the simple moral case is not enough, let me set out some of the practical reasons why the global community should support poverty eradication in Asia.

HILARY BENN

THE one theme that continues to dominate global economic discussion, and took centre stage at this year's World Economic Forum at Davos, is the rise and rise of the new economic powerhouses, India and China.

You cannot open a newspaper or listen to the news without seeing the impressive statistics and stories about economic growth in Asia or reading dire warnings about the threat posed to the European economy. So why am I writing about aid and development assistance for Asia?

Asia is a huge and diverse region. The skyscrapers of Mumbai and Shanghai are symbols of an impressive success. But they are not the whole Asian story. Huge inequalities continue to exist across the region. In some cases, the divide between rich and poor is growing as a result of that same economic miracle and the resulting rapid urbanisation and enormous social change. Developing Asian countries is not only the right thing to do, it's eminently sensible.

Let's look at what has been achieved already. High and sustained growth in successful Asian countries has led to the greatest number of people being lifted out of poverty in human history. Country success stories abound. In recent years, China has lifted 400 million people out of extreme poverty; Vietnam has doubled the size of its economy in the last decade and at the same time has reduced poverty faster than anyone else. Since the early 1990s, India has lifted 12 million people out of poverty every single year. What are the implications for Asia as a whole if those successes can be repeated? What are the implications for world poverty if the global community can learn from Asia's success?

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poverty in a generation. That's more than 600 million people, currently living on less than a dollar a day, whose lives could be measurably improved by clean water, access to basic healthcare and a host of other services that we in the UK take for granted. But if the simple moral case is not enough, let me set out some of the practical reasons why the global community should support poverty eradication in Asia.

We in the international community have a stake in Asia succeeding just as much as Asians have a stake in the international community accommodating their emerging economic dynamism.

Let's start with the environment. To achieve growth, poor countries will use more and more power and consume more and more resources. The international community should work with Asian countries to help them as they develop better ways of generating power, use forests and water supplies more sustainably, and work to manage the environmental impact arising from economic growth. And the international community must focus on the consequences of this growth for the planet, because -- above all in the case of climate change -- unless we tackle this issue now, it will have a huge effect on all of us in years to come.

Next, take the question of competition. Poor people are the private sector. They are the farmers and small businesses that we are trying to help.

Some development campaigns say little explicitly about the creation of more and better jobs for poor people. I think there is little real debate about growth. There can even be hostility to the idea of international integration into the global economy. Some argue that globalisation is a race to the bottom. But ask poor people, as I do wherever I travel, where the best prospect for escaping poverty lies. They'll tell you it is through self-employment or business -- "a good job." If they ignore job creation and

opportunities for poor people to contribute economically, poor countries will be risking the sustainability of their growth success. And that's in no-one's interest.

And finally, if, together, we don't tackle poverty, injustice and inequality then we will never have a safe and secure world, wherever we live. Ensuring peace and security is the foundation of any development.

All this means that Asia has the potential to eradicate absolute poverty -- this could be one of the world's great success stories. Asian experience leads the world. At the same time, Asian governments want to learn from best practice in tackling the entrenched poverty in their midst. Asian governments increasingly want to work with us, as well as with each other, on a development programme that will continue to include aid but will also increasingly address issues such as trade, investment, population, migration and the environment.

This is why the UK Department for International Development, together with our partners the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, is hosting a major gathering of politicians, experts, private sector, civil society and development agencies. The Asia 2015: Promoting Growth, Ending Poverty conference meets next month to discuss development challenges facing Asia and to develop ideas on the way forward over next ten years. This is the start of a debate that will go far beyond the meeting next month -- indeed, it's a debate that you may join now, online. It could be the start of one of the biggest changes we will see in our lifetime.

Hilary Benn is the Secretary of State for International Development, UK.