

After the patrons now

One way of striking at the root

WE welcome the government's announcement to go after the patrons of the JMB and other religious extremist groups. The government has also drawn up list of the possible patrons alongside commencing probe to identify their godfathers, and that's good news too.

The media have been consistently harping on the fact that without patronisation at home, particularly from political quarters, it could never have been possible for the militants to survive. There is also a strong rationale that suggests support from certain section of the administration that allowed these groups not only to germinate but also to spread and strengthen their tentacles.

We have been witness to blatant political exploitation of the religious sentiments of the people through what has been the worst kind of abuse of politically elected position. The denial mode of the previous government was incomprehensible and not surprisingly some of those in the administration who were the most vociferous in denying the existence of the JMB are suspected accomplices of the crimes of JMB militants. One wonders whether the two major parties realise that it's their political animosity over the last several years that had provided space to these elements to exploit.

The convicted militants have met their deserved fate. One hopes that they have not taken all their secrets with them to their graves. We must not lose sight of the fact that in such organisations it is not people but extremist ideology that drives its members. And these ideologies are sustained by their patrons at home and abroad. The only way to curb the spread of the network is to counter their ideology but even more importantly cut off their source of sustenance totally. Once the tap is turned off the plant will starve to death. The sooner that is done the sooner will we be free of the threat that these elements pose to the nation.

We also feel that not only must the local patrons be brought to book and served the severest of punishment, it is also imperative that the external links, if any, must also be unearthed. We must know the extent of foreign support, without which future planning of the defensive mechanism against such elements is likely to prove difficult, if not altogether impossible.

Thirteen OSDs

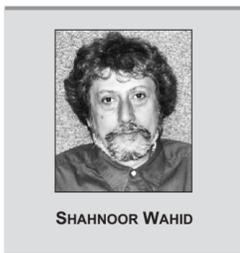
Civil service must follow rules of conduct

THE administration has finally taken action against the civil servants who met at the Uttara office of a former energy adviser last November in what was seen to be questionable circumstances. These officers, thirteen in all and holding various levels of position in the bureaucratic hierarchy, have been made officers on special duty, or OSDs, which essentially amounts to making them inoperative. The expectation is that such a course of action by the government will in good time lead to an investigation of why these officers met as they did in November and why all of them chose to scamper off at the sight of the media before the office where they had gathered.

There can be little question that the Uttara incident requires deft and efficient handling in the interest of the civil service itself. The officers who have just been made OSDs unfortunately came together at a time and in circumstances when politics was taking a volatile shape. It has long been suspected that the meeting might have been in clear furtherance of a certain political interest. Whether or not it was that is something for the administration to throw light on. A little more seriousness has been added to the issue by a caretaker adviser's assertion that the officers involved in the Uttara affair will be dealt with under the normal law of the land if they are found guilty of wrongdoing. The OSDs could end up being made good, meaningful examples of. No one will take issue with the idea that any violation of civil service rules should be handled sternly, which is why it has always been our position that the civil service must always remain above politics because those who are part of it are servants of the republic rather than being errand boys for political parties holding power. In the recent past, the principle of the civil administration being non-political in character has all too often been blurred by those who have wielded power, of course in collusion with a group of self-seeking bureaucrats.

In the larger interest of the country, the civil service needs to keep above political influence of any shade or denomination in their field of work. It is a job that can be done through ensuring a strict return to the code of conduct on the basis of which civil servants must carry out their responsibilities to the state. Such an objective can be attained through taking to task anyone guilty of violating the code.

Religion in the hands of imbeciles



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Community leaders and common villagers inside the country need to be educated and demotivated through organizing discussion meetings on the importance of maintaining religious harmony in society as well as the demerits of militancy in a modern era. They need to be told that militancy and religiosity are not synonymous. By all means, religion cannot be left in the hands of the imbeciles.

food, fruits and the human race.

They only want to pray and sit around in groups in between prayers and talk about others who do not pray. They do not work because they expect others to feed them. They are happy that some black money owners, corrupt politicians, NGOs, and foreign countries are sending money to keep them fed, clothed and armed. Life is so easy, so why bother to till the land or work in a factory? That's not for us; we are into religion! Work is for the sinners.

But, do the leaders of these misguided young militants actually cherish the idea of going to heaven before time? Do they despise the idea of earthly gifts, possessions and pleasures? It does not seem so. The top leaders like to raise a family and live in comfort with cell phones. They do not have to do any work since money comes from the donors.

All they have to do is brainwash poor village boys in the name of religion so that they go and blow up people. And the leaders wait for the opportunity to grab state power.

There is more fun in wielding earthly power over illiterate, poor people; driving around in expensive earthly automobiles and so on. That is why the top leaders of JMB did not want to take a premature trip to heaven in the end, and, accordingly, for the love of their life, sent the mercy petition to the president. But didn't they reject their trial under Taguti law? Remember, how strong their voice was before the current government came to power? Why did they look so defiant and dared to smile in the courts after arrest? Did they expect a dramatic turn of events through the intervention of some powerful quarter?

In fact, some bizarre acts in the JMB drama remain to be

explained by the then home ministry bigwigs, some of whom even looked for the possibility of Hindu militants blowing themselves up to establish Islamic laws! Bravo! Next, why and how an under-trial prisoner (Sunny) could appear before the national electronic media to weep in repentance for his acts and call his comrades, including his brother the high priest, to lay down arms and surrender to the law? Who gave the permission to stage such a drama? Was that part of a ploy to arrange for general amnesty for the criminals touching on people's religious sentiment? Shouldn't investigators look into this if we really want to get to the bottom of the entire scam?

At the same time, investigators should also look into all types of activities going on inside the madrasas in the country. Most of these places, especially in the

remote areas, are nothing but recruitment and training centres for the future militants. A raid in these institutes any time of the day would reveal numerous booklets on how to prepare bombs and how to organise jihad; CDs on training; cassettes containing Urdu and Bengali speeches of militant leaders of the subcontinent; and last but not least, hideous looking choppers (chapati) with very long blades that have nothing to do with religious education.

Then what are those doing there? Why no one dares to challenge the madrasa authorities? Is it because of the fear of invoking divine wrath? Has divinity and piety got anything to do with a bunch of nitwits who go around intimidating people in the name of religion?

Surprisingly, these illiterate yet dangerously motivated people have been in the centre stage of religious education having no grasp on intellectual elucidation of the esoteric.

And yet, educated people, weak in the mind, have been taking them home to earn the favours of God! Why don't they pray or cry themselves? Why should some imbeciles cry for their salvation!

In order to check the growth of militancy in Bangladesh, existing

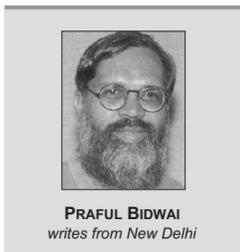
laws have to be applied forcefully; new laws have to be created; madrasa education has to be modified with the inclusion of English language proficiency course and vocational training and computer skill training courses.

A special body has to be created to monitor every activity taken by the madrasa authorities. And a joint monitoring system may be developed with the West Bengal government to keep eyes on the cross border movement of militant madrasa students on two sides of the border. It is a problem that was never looked into. If implemented effectively, this would help contain the inflow of bombs, detonators and small arms from the other side of the border.

Lastly, community leaders and common villagers inside the country need to be educated and demotivated through organizing discussion meetings on the importance of maintaining religious harmony in society as well as the demerits of militancy in a modern era. They need to be told that militancy and religiosity are not synonymous. By all means, religion cannot be left in the hands of the imbeciles.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Cricket as a gigantic scam



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

Cricket claims more loss of social time than strikes and lockouts do in industry. Someone has just calculated that if India were to reach the World Cup finals, fans in India's 81 million television homes would have spent 106.5 million man-days watching the "idiot box." This is more than three-and-a-half times the man-days annually lost in industrial actions (30 million)! This cricket obsession isn't natural. It has been systematically cultivated through multi-billion dollar marketing, sales promotion and advertising.

state of the pitch, order of batting, audience response, etc.

India was ranked number six in the world, and wasn't expected to win the Cup. It hasn't won a limited-overs tournament played abroad since 1985! Yet, many people cannot accept that another team may be better than theirs. It's absurd to impute the vilest of causes and motives to defeat, including lack of "the killer instinct," loss of will, or absence of "national pride."

However, we have elevated cricket into a passion, detached from joy. A cricket victory is seen as affirmation of Indian nationalism -- a sports version of "Mera Bharat Mahan." Nothing excites Indians as much as cricket. Not even politics or divisive social issues.

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days annually lost in industrial actions (30 million)!

This cricket obsession isn't natural. It has been systematically cultivated through multi-billion dollar marketing, sales promotion and advertising. Our cricket stars are omnipresent -- in advertising for colas, processed foods, cars, ayurvedic remedies, eggs, on Page 3, and in countless glamour stories churned out by the media.

This is part of the corporatisation of cricket and its organising bodies. Last year, the Board of Control for Cricket in India sold telecasting rights for a humongous Rs 2,750 crores! The International Cricket Council sold rights for the current and the next World Cup for an even higher \$1.1 billion (Rs 4,950 crores).

Sony Entertainment Television sold advertising at Rs 5 lakhs for each 10-second spot, raking in some Rs 350-400 crores. Dwarfing this is the money invested in betting, estimated at Rs 4,000 crores.

Next come India's top cricket stars. They make Rs 12 to 20 crores a year each for endorsing

products ranging from shoes to life insurance.

The all-pervasive, predatory influence of corporations in cricket wouldn't have become possible without ICC, BCCI and state-level boards being turned into commercial entities.

Cricket now has a horrible grotesque side too: international match-fixing. Nothing highlights this more starkly than the murder of Bob Woolmer -- cricket's worst-ever event. International cricket is acquiring the same gangster-dominated character as Mumbai's real estate business, marked by blackmailing, extortion and murder.

We are witnessing the transformation of a sport into an organised, semi-criminalised business. Whatever corporates touch turns into dust, often bloody dust.

The baneful influence of corporate sponsorship is now visible in other fields too, especially "high culture." Patronage of culture was long monopolised by the state. Now, culture is becoming dependent on corporate sponsorship. Corporates, work-

ing through event management companies, typically only support "star" events, which generate huge billings or attract high-profile audiences.

Thus, in Hindustani classical music, only a handful of performers -- like Amjad Ali Khan, Pandit Jasraj, Kishori Amonkar, Shivkumar Shama and Vishwa Mohan Bhat -- get top-level sponsors. Others get left out because they don't know how to play the sponsorship-publicity game.

The "Star system" is equally dominant in dance, and to a lesser extent, theatre. One reason is the paucity of good theatres, and their exorbitant rents, going up to Rs 20,000 or 50,000 for an evening.

Unless performers find large-sized funding, they cannot stage events. Unless their art conforms to the tastes of corporations, they won't get funding. "Big" names count, quality doesn't. Nor do serious experimental forms and "non-mainstream" performing arts.

Sponsors are all-powerful. They can cancel performances at the last minute because the audience may not generate enough billings. Often, their nominees flood the audience.

That's what happened when jazz stars Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter recently performed in Mumbai. Ninety percent of the seats were allotted to sponsors. Their nominees ensured that the concert would be a dud. Jazz-lovers couldn't get entry.

In the past, government-sponsored concerts would see great artistes performing to empty front-rows reserved for ministers and bureaucrats. Now, artistes play to equally empty front-rows, or pander to dark-suited businessmen.

The most corrupting influence of corporatisation is to be seen in painting. This art-form has become a big investment source. Its market turnover has ballooned from Rs 5 crores in 1997 to Rs 1,000 crores. Artists now employ imitation specialists to produce "their" work.

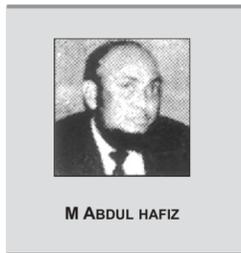
Art auction-houses have sprouted in city after city to cater to the business investor -- typically, without taste. An especially grotesque form of such art-commerce amalgamation was a recent venture under which 100 artists and 110 "eminent citizens," including ministers and CEOs, collaboratively produced 120 paintings.

So you had Finance Minister P. Chidambaram sharing brushstrokes with Anjolie Ela Menon, Ratan Tata and Laxman Shrestha producing a painting over three sittings, and Tina Ambani and Jogen Chowdhury "creating" a new work. It's shocking that such well-known artists agreed to destroy the integrity of their discipline.

Corporate sponsorship corrupts. It always will. We must rescue art, culture and sports from it.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

America's invisible empire



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

In some cases, the host countries themselves have kept the US bases on their soil secret, fearing adverse repercussion or embarrassment if their collusion with US imperialism was revealed. In other instances, the Pentagon itself seems willing to play down the building of facilities aimed at dominating energy sources or, in a related situation, retaining a network of bases that could keep Iraq under US hegemony regardless of the wishes of the future Iraqi government.

the exact size and value of this empire of bases, which has always been obscured by non-transparency, and remains a closely guarded secret till date. In a special secret world of their own none would ever know the true size of the US base world.

The official records available to the public on the subject are often misleading, although instructive. According to the Defense Department's annual inventories, from 2002 to 2005, of the properties it owns around the world there has been an immense increase in the number of US installations abroad.

America's military bases in other people's countries stood at 737 as per official sources. The massive US deployment, and the pursuit of President Bush's strategy of pre-emptive wars suggest that the number of the country's overseas bases is much higher, and will continue to go up.

Coincidentally, the thirty eight large and medium sized American facilities spread around the world in 2005 -- mostly air and naval bases for the US bombers and the fleets -- almost equals Britain's thirty six naval bases and garrisons at its zenith at the close of the nineteenth century.

Roman empire at its peak in 117 AD required more or less thirty seven bases to enforce its writ over a realm that extended from Britannia to Egypt and from Hispania to America. Perhaps the optimum number of major citadels required to have imperial sway lies somewhere between thirty five and forty -- a number the US imperialist designs conform to.

Using the data from fiscal year 2005, the Pentagon bureaucrats calculated that its overseas bases were worth \$127bn -- surely far too small a figure by any conventional wisdom because, in the same year, the US military

high command deployed to its overseas bases some 196,675 uniformed personnel as well as an equal number of dependants and Department of Defense officials. It also employed an additional 81,425 locally hired foreigners.

The world-wide total of US military personnel in 2005, including those based domestically, was 840,062, supported by Defense Department civil service employees and 203,328 locals. Yet the figure given by Pentagon is indeed mind-boggling, and larger than the GDP of most other countries.

Its over-seas bases, according to the Pentagon, contained 32,327 barracks, hangers, hospitals and other buildings which it owned and 16,527 more that it leased. The size of these holdings was recorded in the inventories as covering 687,347 acres overseas and 29,819,492 acres worldwide -- making the Pentagon easily one of the world's largest landlords.

These figures, although staggeringly big, do not cover all the

actual bases the US occupies globally. The 2005 Base Structure Report fails, for example, to mention the garrison in Kosovo, although it is the site of the huge Carip Bond steel mill built in 1999 and maintained ever since by Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR), a subsidiary of the infamous Halliburton Corporation. The report similarly omits bases in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar and Uzbekistan, even though the US military has established bases in central Asian areas since 9/11.

The Pentagon continues to omit from its accounts most of the \$5bn worth of military and espionage installations in Britain, which have long been conveniently disguised as Royal Air Force bases. If there was an honest count, and the actual size of US military empire calculated, it would top the category, but no one -- possibly not even the Pentagon -- knows the exact numbers of its bases and allied facilities.

In some cases, the host countries themselves have kept the

US bases on their soil secret, fearing adverse repercussion or embarrassment if their collusion with US imperialism was revealed. In other instances, the Pentagon itself seems willing to play down the building of facilities aimed at dominating energy sources or, in a related situation, retaining a network of bases that could keep Iraq under US hegemony regardless of the wishes of the future Iraqi government. The US government does not divulge any information about the bases it uses to eavesdrop on global communications or to deploy its nuclear arms, which, in many cases, violated treaty obligations.

In fact, the US has been lying to many of its closest allies, even in Nato, about its nuclear designs. Tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, hundreds of bases, and dozens of ships and submarines exist in a special secret world of their own, with no rational military, or even "deterrence," justification. In Jordan, for example, the US has secretly deployed upto five thousand troops in bases on the Iraqi and

Syrian borders.

Yet Jordan continues to stress that it has no special arrangements with the United States, no bases and no American military presence. But the fact of the matter is this that the country is formally sovereign, but has actually been a satellite of the US for at least the last ten years. Similarly, before the US withdrawal from Saudi Arabia in 2003, when the former left behind a fleet of enormous B-52 bombers in Jeddah, the US justified it by saying that it was so demanded by Saudi government.

In the same way, the US military bases have spawned a global empire which is already stretched to the limit. This is quite in consonance with the neo-conservative world-view. At the core of it is the resolve to obstruct the rise of any "near-peer," and block the country that might one day challenge US military supremacy.

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