

## Preventing use of formalin

Traders respond positively

It is welcome news that the fish and vegetable traders in the city have felt the need for preventing the use of formalin as a preservative in fish and vegetables. They have urged the authorities concerned to form 10 monitoring committees with a view to eliminating the practice. The use of the highly detrimental preservative has been identified as a major threat to public health, and mobile courts have already punished some traders for using it.

However, what is needed here is total elimination of the evil practice that exposes the consumers to some grave dangers, including damage of vital organs. Hence, the government should seriously consider the proposal put forward by the traders to intensify the drive against formalin users.

It seems all the rotten fish suddenly disappear into thin air and we find fish resistant to any kind of decomposition. But the cure turns out to be worse than the malady, as it has been discovered that formalin (a chemical substance used in plastic factories!) is being applied to fish and vegetables to keep them fresh. It is not known who invented this sinister method which amounts to slow-poisoning the consumers, but there is no doubt that very little was done in the past to punish the culprits. Drive against such foul practices did not have a prominent place in the work plans formulated by successive governments and general consumers were helpless.

The traders have demanded that their representatives be included in the monitoring committees along with the law enforcers. We believe they are not asking for too much, as it may help the committees to identify the real culprits while making sure that the innocents are not punished.

Fish and vegetables are two very important food items. So the presence of any poison in them is something that can only cause great worry to the consumers. The government has so far dealt with the issue very strongly. Now, by including the traders in the campaign against the use of toxic preservatives it can further strengthen the social resistance against the menace.

## Children deprived of playground

Those occupying must give it back

THE only playground for children in Khilgaon, a densely populated area in the city, and popularly known as Para Pachar Math, has long been a bone of contention between various authorities and influential people of the locality. According to the local people, this is the only open ground that can essentially serve as a playground for their children. For a long time the ground was surrounded by rickshaw garages, various makeshift workshops and stores. Despite the risk factors involved due to the presence of these establishments, children of the locality continued to visit the ground and entertained themselves in whatever way they could.

Now the playground has been taken over by Bangladesh Ansar and Village Defense Party (VDP) and made off limits to anyone else. It is interesting to note that both the agencies occupied the playground by raising permanent fences all around it despite the fact that an injunction was issued by a High Court bench on February 2, 2006, forbidding "raising of any type of construction or causing landscape transformer". Not only that, when some people of the locality arrived at the site, they were apparently assaulted and some among them were even detained.

We find the whole incident not only condemnable but also unfortunate. This city essentially has mutated into a jungle of concrete structures. The city dwellers hardly have any access to any playgrounds or parks worthy of use. As a consequence, the worst sufferers are our children. As it is, there is hardly anything by way of clean, healthy outdoor entertainment, particularly for those who live in such localities and come from families belonging to moderate and lower income groups. Surely these children have the right to go to an open space, run around and breathe in the air freely just like anyone else. It is only proper that they be allowed to grow up as healthy members of our coming generation.

We would, therefore, urge the administration to take all necessary measures for the playground in question to be vacated so that the children of the locality can get back to their natural pursuit.

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

T was for the first time ever, since August 15, 1975, that the chief of Bangladesh Army publicly lamented the failure of the whole nation to give formal recognition to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the father of the nation. In his emotionally choked words he added that it was Sheikh Mujib who gave us a new flag, a free and independent country.

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The chief of the Bangladesh Army played host in the first ever formal reception given by our armed forces to the valiant sons of the soil who staked their lives in the Liberation War in 1971. He was terribly hurt that our freedom fighters had been perpetually ignored, and that never before had a formal evaluation of their great contribution to the nation been made.

One hundred freedom fighters present at the reception ceremony were presented with a crest and a certificate of investiture. This would be a recurring function every year, he promised. The general exhorted the freedom fighters and all patriotic forces in the country to reunite and wage a relentless war against corruption, nepotism, extortion, terrorism and other unlawful practices.

The army chief made a direct reference to the failure of the outgoing government of the BNP-led 4-party alliance. He particularly alluded to the miserable plight of

## Containing the terrorist menace



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE execution of the six Jama'atul Mujahedin militants in end-March has been lauded as an example of determination on the part of the interim government. This should not however be treated as the end of a very traumatic chapter in our national history. Consequently, we have been most encouraged when senior officials of the Administration and the Inspector General of Police have remarked that efforts will continue to identify and apprehend all others who have aided and provided protection to these criminals.

There cannot be halfway measures. I have written about this before and I reiterate once again that people who misuse religion to terrorise others are best confined in detention. Allah alone has the right to judge and punish, but in the meantime, we need to abide by temporal laws and constitutional obligations that are applicable for every citizen of the State. We cannot take up justice in our own hands. Nor can we judge and punish someone except in conformity with the existing laws of the land and due judicial process. It is incumbent on all of us to avoid abetting, in any manner, any form of religious extremism or to claim that one faith should be preferable to another.

Freedom of thought and right to practice one's religion are important elements in the body fabric of fundamental freedoms. We need

not agree with a person's view of life. He also has the right to disagree, and one should accept it, as long as his actions do not disturb public peace or restrain the freedom of movement or speech of another.

We have to understand something very clearly. The people of this country fought a war of liberation and millions sacrificed themselves for the sake of religious tolerance, secularism and freedom. We over-

came against the JMB and other Islamic extremist groups. This included downgrading efforts by law enforcement officials aimed at apprehending extremist culprits and finding out more about JMB's weapons caches. Such interventions permitted this major issue to grow steadily into a hydra-headed monster.

Compulsions within the BNP alliance ensured that there was no strategic success with regard to containment of the mil-

itance government's response was predictable. They denied all charges with vigour and appointed lobbyists at great expense of the State to put a spin on the deteriorating scenario.

Such an ostrich syndrome reflex however came to an end with the concerted explosions by the JMB in 63 of the country's 64 districts on 17 August 2005. The killing of the Judges on 14 November 2005 followed this criminal act. Despite

arrived at conclusions as to not only what makes JMB tick but also why and how it could recruit and motivate its sympathizers. This is important if we have to tackle this insidious growth effectively.

Media reports based on intelligence sources have indicated that only about 700 of JMB's active membership have been identified and detained. It has also emerged that 25 district commanders of the JMB out of 64 have till date man-

without addressing root causes. The two most significant amongst them, in my opinion, are poverty (lack of economic opportunities) and the method and manner in which religious education is being imparted in some Madrassas. Both these factors are working against the spirit of inclusiveness and assimilation within the broader network.

We need to open windows of partnership between the secular and the religious formats of education. This may be in the form of technical educations, greater exposure to scientific subjects and the availability of vocational training in these Madrassas. Students belonging to such educational institutions must be made to feel less confined. They, and their guardians, should also be able to see that they have alternatives and economic opportunities. Only then, will they realise, that they can function, not in isolation, but as part of a vibrant evolving society without having to give up their conservative principles.

Arranging such a happy blend should be given utmost priority by our ministry of education and its varied agencies, particularly in the rural hinterland of Bangladesh. There is no other way to beat extremism and fundamentalism. We need to let the sunlight of understanding come in so that the darkness of mistrust can be effaced. We have to be sensitive and patient in this regard.

An enabling environment has to be created where militants realise that the way forward is through economic development rather than extra-constitutional means. This will also require State institutions to be friends rather than adversaries.

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## POST BREAKFAST

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came prejudice and state sponsored terrorism so that we could emerge as an enlightened and independent nation.

Today, most unfortunately, with the re-emergence of religion based politics, we are again faced with the sordid cancer of religious fanaticism. The last BNP-led alliance government contributed to this deterioration in the social body politic through their continuous state of denial about this evolving phenomenon. The print media, since the execution, have highlighted more than once how senior leaders of the BNP and their partner Jamaat-e-Islami refused the existence of this scourge and continued to cast aspersions on the media for creating a monster from their imagination.

It is now being revealed that country to the claims of the previous political leadership, some among them had exercised their influence directly and indirectly to suppress all investigations and inquiry initia-

tancy.

Bombings, grenade attacks and vigilante justice in the meantime resulted in the death of opposition activists and political leaders. These casualties were however glibly explained away by the then government as results of internal bickering within the opposition fold. Superficial inquiries were started and never properly followed up. Some suspects were picked up, but there was no transparency in the subsequent judicial process. The opposition tried to discuss these criminal acts in the Jatiya Sangshad but was unable to do so because of open partisanship. Fairness and equity were booted out of that august house.

Bangladesh and its image continued to suffer. Narrow political ends received priority over national interests. We slowly acquired the reputation of being a hub for terrorists and Islamic fundamentalists who had links with international Al-Qaeda operatives. The BNP-

efforts to the contrary, the BNP-alliance government found itself under the international spotlight. The gravity of the situation was finally acknowledged and the government of the day was forced to show some decisiveness in the tracking down of the notorious JMB elements that had earlier been described as 'phantoms'.

We have now had the execution of the known JMB leadership. However, this is obviously not enough. We understand that during remand and inquiry, these extremists revealed aspects of their militant organisation. We hope that the authorities were able to, during these interrogations, access to information regarding the organogram, the mode of financing, the contacts of this militant organisation within the country as well as abroad and also the nature of their decision-making and recruitment processes.

Now is the time to re-evaluate every aspect of their activities and

aged to evade arrest. Leaflets ascribed to the JMB have also claimed that they have suicide squads who might be used to assault top political leaders, teachers, intellectuals, business leaders and social workers (who are criticised for promoting gender empowerment through micro-credit). There have also been hints that the JMB might try to attack key national infrastructural installations and commit other subversive acts.

I do not know how much of these claims are true. However, one thing is clear. This outfit and a few other

extremist terrorist groups are

working against our national security and need to be neutralized without further delay. If necessary,

we should have no hesitation to share and seek information about them from other intelligence agencies in the region and also from the Interpol, FBI and Scotland Yard.

No containment of such deviationist terrorist behaviour will however be satisfactorily possible

## Common market for South Asia?

KULDIP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

PAKISTAN Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz probably did not say anything new when he pointed out in a press conference at Delhi a few days ago that trade with India was linked to a solution on Kashmir. But he did correct the general impression that the two countries would have free trade, especially when Kashmir was under discussion behind the scenes.

When he made the opening remarks, Shaukat Aziz mentioned travel, trade and Kashmir in the same breath. But then he realised that the relaxation of visa facilities, which the two countries had already accepted, would sound hollow if he were to bracket travel with Kashmir. He watered down his reservations on travel. He was probably confident that whatever visa facilities he had agreed to, Islamabad could always nullify through its mission in India.

In fact, I have found how the two governments have agreed to the liberalisation because of popular pressure on both sides. But it is equally true that they go back on the facilities whenever they feel like, or whenever the intelligence

agencies frighten them over the increase in the number of visitors.

After a five-day stay last month in Lahore, Pakistan's political capital, my impression is different: the public and the establishment are at variance. People want to open up with India, a bigger market and a larger economic unit. Yet the government, beleaguered by internal problems, does not want Indians in the midst if it can help it.

Industrialists and businessmen

industrialists have generally felt that they are in no way inferior to their counterparts in India. Two, the circuitous route the goods of both countries take through Dubai and Singapore raise the costs unnecessarily, and even profit a particular clique in the establishment.

However, Shaukat Aziz's observation has once again defeated the Saarc purpose, which looked like emerging from the debris of bad

the dust when it is beginning to settle down, probably because of some specific proposals New Delhi has sent to Islamabad? The progress is slow because there is a difference of outlook over the joint control. Still, the fact that India has come up with suggestions to

change the status quo is a step forward. New Delhi has not done so officially so far.

Finalising even a modicum of agreement will take time. This will

aid SAARC. Shaukat Aziz himself said that the time has come for them to implement the declarations they have made. Then why bring in matters like Kashmir, which should be sorted out away from public gaze?

The core problem is how soon will economic prosperity come to the region, so that people can forget religious and other differences and set themselves the task of improving their standard of living.

Europe has done or the ASEAN countries have nearly done. After the emergence of Bangladesh I asked Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, then heading Pakistan, whether the common market to string together countries in South Asia was feasible. He said: "We will have to see whether we can mutually benefit but, in principle, I think as far as a common market is concerned, we are not ready for such an arrangement. Europe also was not ready for it. It took time for Europe as a whole to get the advantage of a common market. Today, we are basically producers of primary commodities and our industrial progress has been better than ours. We have also had some industrial progress but we have not reached that standard where there can be a grand collaboration in industry, because these things are very difficult to arrange and even Europe is finding it difficult regarding agriculture commodities."

That was 35 years ago. Pakistan, if not Bangladesh, has come a long way. The development depends on harnessing natural resources, manpower and technical know-how in the region, from Afghanistan to Bangladesh, and using them collectively. There is an unhappy history. With time, we may jettison the baggage of the past. As Qaid e Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah said before partition: "Some nations have killed millions of each others, yet an enemy of today is a friend of tomorrow. That is history."

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

The core problem is how soon will economic prosperity come to the region, so that people can forget religious and other differences and set themselves the task of improving their standard of living. This is not impossible, because all the Saarc countries are now committed to social justice and democracy. I support Shaukat Aziz's other observation, that there has to be a level-playing field. India is a developed country while, in comparison, Pakistan is developing. If India is justified in seeking concessions from the developed West, Pakistan has every right to expect concessions from India. New Delhi has done well to announce custom-free entry to goods from small neighbouring countries.

are more eager than others to have free trade with India, because they realise that the solution on Kashmir is like waiting till the cows come home. At a meeting of a commerce chamber, where I was present, an industrialist representing the setup said that he used to believe that Kashmir was the core problem of disputes between India and Pakistan. But he had come to realise that the core problem was free trade, not Kashmir. Nearly 50 leading industrialists present at the meeting applauded him. I did not find any media criticism about his views.

Two things have contributed to

relations between India and Pakistan. The 22-year-old organisation has made no headway because New Delhi and Islamabad have been at daggers drawn. One felt that there was realization, at last, to keep politics and economics apart. But this is not the case when a person like Shaukat Aziz, who once headed a foreign banking organization, plays to the gallery.

This does not mean that the Kashmir question should be put aside. It has to be sorted out, not only for the sake of peace in the region but also for the satisfaction of the people who have died in thousands to change the status quo. Why should Islamabad kick

need to be placed before the public for debate. Then it will be presented to parliament in India and the National Assembly in Pakistan. This process is difficult and time consuming. Should Saarc be held to ransom? Trade cannot wait till then. Members at the summit emphasised this.

When Shaukat Aziz cautioned at dinner at the Pakistan High Commission in Delhi that the coming generations would not forgive them if they continued to remain mired in conflict, I told him that this was precisely what my generation said two decades ago. Words have no meaning if they are not backed up with action. Indeed, this is what

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## OPINION

## Resounding lamentation of a soldier

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

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