

Sponsoring terrorists

A sad tale of BNP's political irresponsibility

THE nexus between the BNP-Jamaat alliance government and the JMB, which the media, including this newspaper, had exposed to public knowledge several years back, has once again been confirmed through a very extensive investigative report recently carried by The Daily Star.

It reveals many new things and reconfirms many apprehensions that we had been expressing since this radical group first made its vile appearance. It reveals most poignantly how petty partisan considerations can allow a religious obscurantist group the space and provide the support to develop into such a powerful force as to threaten our national security. It surprises us little that the alleged patrons acted in the way they did, given the many acts of indiscretion they and some of their colleagues had indulged in at the expense of national interest, as revealed from the interrogation reports of some of them now in custody. But it worries us a great deal to think that those we had entrusted our security and our nation's interest to had failed to live up to their bounden duty. The matter becomes more agonising when the report reveals that these activities were done under the full knowledge of the then prime minister.

Among the most reprehensible of acts of the BNP alliance government was the unabashed denial of the existence of the JMB or Bangla Bhai, rather they claimed, without a flinch or any qualms of conscience, that these were nothing more than a figment of the media's imagination, an invention of the newspapers. It is unacceptable that the nation was made to suffer the agonies of the bombings and the resultant loss of lives, and fingers were pointed at Bangladesh as being a prospective hotbed of Islamic terrorism, when these people were actually being patronised by some influential persons within the government.

We are happy to note that the caretaker government has taken cognisance of the matter. Those ministers and deputy ministers who were allegedly involved in sponsoring the terrorists and who had prevented the law enforcing agencies from taking action against these elements when they first made their appearance, have been taken in custody. They deserve the maximum punishment for putting our national security at stake.

But the government should also consider appointing a high level committee to inquire in depth about the links and funding of the terrorists and the extent of their influence in our society. By some accounts these elements are regrouping after their setback, which many experts believe may only be temporary

Adolescent delinquency

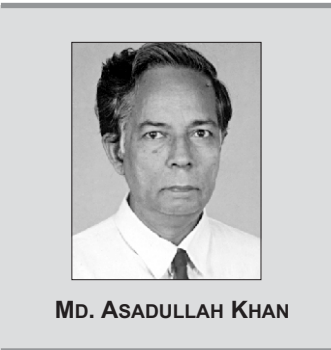
Juvenile courts and correction centres should deal with it

LITTLE wonder, the sentencing in a Jamalpur court of one 16-year-old and another aged 17, to ten and seven-year imprisonment terms, respectively, in an arms case, has surprised legal experts and children's rights activists. The police had found a cartridge in possession of the 17-year old and a revolver with the 16-year old lad. They apparently couldn't explain how the fire arms got into their hands. For all one knows, the Children's Act 1974 and the Supreme Court's instructions categorically require that children should be tried only in juvenile courts whatever the allegations against them. Apart from the jurisdictional question of who should have rightfully tried them there is the issue of sentencing them to long-term imprisonment evoking child rights concerns.

Let's bring up the broader issue of juvenile delinquency. Driven by poverty and squalor and having nothing to look forward to, children are most vulnerable to exploitation by criminal elements and other vested interest groups. They are often used as carriers of drugs and weapons, especially the slum-dwelling and the floating adolescents. To keep them from all sorts of negative or evil influence they need to be given the minimal opportunity for a reasonably organised and engaging lifestyle. The child welfare network of the government has limitations, a void that can only be filled by a complementary role of the NGOs.

So far as dealing with delinquent behaviour goes, we must have adequate number of juvenile courts and correctional centres or penitentiaries. They should not be on paper only but must be functional and relate to areas most vulnerable to child criminality. As a preventive option, we need to open guidance and counselling centres.

The conventional perception of children's rights is limited to catering to their basic rights to food, shelter, health and schooling which is a tall order alright in a poor country like ours but the time has definitely come now for a concerted effort at the community, government and NGO levels to protect the children from being used as pawns in the adult games of exploitation. Forty-five percent of the total population being teenager, they certainly deserve a special care.

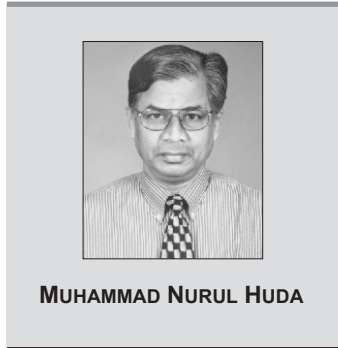


MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

IN the backdrop of the observance of the World Child Labour Elimination Day on June 12 last, sensible citizenry in the country issued a clarion call for arresting the crimes against children especially trafficking and repression of children. Shockingly, when socio-cultural organisations have stressed the need of affording the hapless children for their due some so called educated and affluent families in the city areas of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi have carried on brutal repression on children employed as domestic help. The children are the biggest chunk of the society constituting about 55 percent of the population coming from the poverty ridden rural Bangladesh with tales of hunger, deprivation and malnutrition. In such a context that calls for concerted action by the government and the society it is worth following what one of America's greatest presidents, Franklin D Roosevelt,

once remarked: "We cannot always build the future for our children, but we can build our children for the future." Reports of brutal killing of a domestic help Moina (14) in Munshiganj and Monimala recently in the city are most horrifying. The demonic mistress Kalpana Mazumdar unleashed the worst kind of barbarism by throwing Monimala from the roof that resulted in her death. All these incidents of atrocities indicate a growing frenzy of intolerance among a section of suddenly-rich populace. In fact, atrocities perpetrated on these hapless and defenceless children working as domestic help have crossed the line between human and animal behaviour. Child Rights Forum reports carried by the newspapers in the recent past revealed that in the last two years, about 2400 children in the country were victims of murder, abduction, rape and trafficking. Among them 587 children were murdered, 487 abducted, 565 raped and 787 trafficked outside the country, mostly to be used as camel jockeys in Arab countries. On the other hand admitting the fact that the incidence of violence on domestic helps has been with us always, now it is spreading in a menacing proportion to more and more homes. National Crime Records Bureau report states that crime against girl child is increasing dangerously. Too many children are doing some dreadful jobs in tannery

Overstretching the virtues of democracy



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE demand for the early lifting of the ban on indoor political activities by some quarters assumes added significance in the background of the United States ambassador's remark to the effect that delay in this regard was likely to adversely affect the legitimacy and legacy of the present caretaker government.

However, it is understood that the government of the day is very keen to at least create an appropriate atmosphere for political reforms before considering lifting of the ban on indoor political activities. It has also been said that the restoration of the real mechanics of a truly representational democracy is the priority.

A very pertinent question in view of the above scenario relates to the eagerness or otherwise of the general population about the resumption of usual political activities. One may wonder whether

Bangladeshis are suddenly seeing committed and patriotic individuals, instead of supine and servile politicians, who will deliver them out of the deplorable mess they find themselves in?

In other words, do we have politicians whose activities bear testimony to their passionate commitment to public causes for the defense of the rights and liberties of the common man? Is there credible evidence of pains-

institutions; poverty poses a far smaller threat.

Incidentally, in the democratic experience of Bangladesh since at least 1991, we find that our politicians have remained occupied in maintaining a system, which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice. Instead of vision and imagination, our leaders have served by deception and craftiness. Their eloquence flourished most when

If we have to hurry through for the sake of democracy, and lift the ban on indoor politics even before ensuring the preliminary steps of punishing the corrupt politicians, then the change ushered in by 1/11 will lose its meaning.

Without doubt, our polity will need time for our democracy to have an aristocracy of talent, knowledge and character. While waiting for that, a good number of criminals and plunderers must be

to become wiser? Also, whether we should revert back to that party system which takes grievous toll of an individual's independence, judgment and freedom of action?

The nation has suffered heavily by leaving the governance of the country entirely to so-called politicians. For many such professional politicians, politics is merely bread and butter or, worse, a means of personal enrichment.

The disenchantment of our

STRAIGHT LINE

It is time not merely for a new budget or a new licensing policy or a new price structure. It is perhaps the moment for shaping and molding a new society, for giving a new and clear orientation to the nation. Let us remember that our society has to not only fight against the big time criminals masquerading as politicians, it has also to do away with the few hundred petty tyrants who mushroomed all over the country during the last couple of years.

taking efforts to ensure that the well-springs of democracy remain undefiled? Do we see the few who would make things happen for the overwhelming majority, who have no idea of what happens?

If we look at the history of the sub-continent we find that the people have risen to great heights when they have basked in the glow of noble kings or leaders. We also see that many regimes had been destroyed, not by adversity but by abasement. Corruption has been the greatest solvent of public

public affairs were in the worst condition.

The question that should bother a discerning mind is whether, with our fragile institutions and economic under-performance, we can have a truly representational democracy. There is no denying that the whim and caprice of the ruling clan of the immediate past have transformed our democracy into a confrontational and dysfunctional entity. The burly sinners of our political world have consistently corrupted goodness.

permanently debarred from politics and public life.

The process of replacing the mercenaries of our political arena by men of honour and knowledge will prove lengthy, and the delivery promises will be difficult to fulfil, but the filth and stench of public life have to be cleansed. Politics has to be salvaged from the dangerous blend of incompetence, unscrupulousness and plain wickedness.

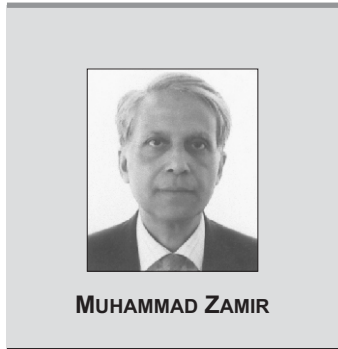
The question is: must the reins of power be handed back to those who appear promise bound never

people with the state of politics and our politicians has to be appreciated. The premonition that after elections the corruption, injustice, power and tyranny of wealth, and inefficiency of administration, will make a hell of life as soon as freedom is given cannot be summarily dismissed.

It is perhaps time to take freedom in moderation. It is also time to see if our legal system has made life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens.

It would not be an exaggeration

Russia's westpolitik and the EU's response



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

RUSSIA'S increasing self-confidence as an "energy power" has changed the balance in its relationship with the EU, as Moscow no longer sees itself as the union's younger partner. It is expected that this transformation will be taken into account during the negotiations between the two sides on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) later this year.

It is generally agreed by analysts that EU-Russia relations for the last ten years have been dominated by three conflicts of interests, often described as integration rivalry, sovereignty versus normativity and asymmetry. These factors have also moulded their responses.

In the context of integration rivalry, since the beginning of this decade, Brussels and Moscow have increasingly become rivals in their attempts to wield their respective influence over the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – the 11 former Soviet Republics. In this regard, the EU has preferred to exercise soft power and has tried to change the regional environment through bilateral, uncoordinated agreements with individual countries. Russia, on the other hand has striven for a realpolitik hegemony in which these countries are included and remain within its sphere of influence.

Similarly, on the issue of sovereignty versus normativity (i.e.

behaviour based on certain norms or standards), it is now accepted that changes have taken place in principles of governance and that this is being reflected in the changes that Russia has undergone under President Vladimir Putin.

During the 1990s, a severely weakened Russia agreed to a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU. It included calls for Moscow to promote democracy and human rights

ments about Russia's political system, does not now reflect new power relations. It is being construed to be so because Russia is no longer the EU's younger partner.

Accordingly, EU policy planners, ahead of the PCA's renewal later this year, think that the EU should now concentrate on functional operations with Russia through strategic partnerships. They believe that there should instead be reduction in the emphasis on normativity

between these two states is expected to influence EU policies within the context of a renewed PCA.

It may be mentioned in this regard that Belarus has prospered economically over the last three years. The so-called "Belarusian tiger state" has benefited from cheap energy supplies from Russia and re-exports of energy products. This matrix has evoked special interest given President Putin's clear obser-

Both sides are also aware that they share overlapping spheres of influence in the ex-Soviet states and have raised their stakes in the pursuit of support. This has complicated matters somewhat. What has happened in Estonia in the recent past has been an interesting example.

Russia aims to be a key power-player in all the countries that were previously part of the USSR. It also knows that it now has few close friends in the region, as CIS coun-

ated with Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine (which has emerged as the world's sixth biggest arms trader) and also questions of integrationalist rivalry. They are taking this line to maintain and continue a semblance of friendly regional relations. EU's involvement in helping to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is being shown as an example of constructive engagement. EU is also emphasising that EU wants to build partnerships and see relations between Russia and CIS countries normalised.

This multi-track approach on the part of the EU, ahead of any renewal or re-wording of the PCA, is also being affected because of economic interests arising out of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Russia. There is growing anxiety about the emerging political and economic risks for FDI in view of the current Russian government turning away from economic liberalisation. The EU leadership has commented that they are not worried, but that is not being totally shared by the business community. In view of that, pressure is being generated to identify minimum benchmarks that have to be taken into account during any future negotiations.

In any case, the EU-Russia scenario is being watched very carefully across the Atlantic. The USA wants a pliant Russia who will support their policies in the Middle East and in the Far East. For them, the EU's response and eventual results in their relationship with a more confident Russia will be vital in charting their own courses of action, both with regard to Russia as well as China.

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POST BREAKFAST

The prospect of a downturn in relations between the EU and Russia have now led to serious examination of this issue of rivalry in different European think-tanks. Consequently, political analysts in Brussels, Berlin and Paris are now giving special emphasis to a EU approach that would identify common interests and help build "sustainable stability." As a result, the EU appears to have taken a go-slow policy with regard to issues associated with Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine (which has emerged as the world's sixth biggest arms trader) and also questions of integrationalist rivalry.

norms. However, now that Russia is a self-confident "energy power," it is insisting that it be treated equally with other major powers.

The country's conservative political elite now wants to shield Russia from external forces that have been pushing for promotion of democracy and human rights within its borders. At the same time however, these decision-makers do not want that Moscow should openly promote its own values to countries immediately beyond its borders. They are aware that such a step might lead to problems with the USA. This approach contrasts with EU foreign policy, which attempts to influence directly the CIS countries' political systems.

European analysts consider the existing asymmetry in the relationship as significant. They feel that increasing Russian power means that the PCA, with its value judg-

in official negotiations and greater efforts towards the influencing of Russia's political system through personal contacts. This, Brussels considers, could be through a more multilateral, coordinated approach.

In this context, the EU under the German Presidency is carefully monitoring the foreign policy of Russia towards its immediate neighbours (formerly part of the USSR) since the last EU-Russia Summit held in Volzhsky Utyos a few weeks ago. On this will depend the subsequent decision as to whether EU will try to strengthen links by opening a delegation office in Minsk.

Special focus is being cast on developments in Belarus and the possible impact on that eastern European country as a consequence of the Russia-Belarus Treaty on the Formation of a Union State that was signed in 1999. Evolution of the political dynamics

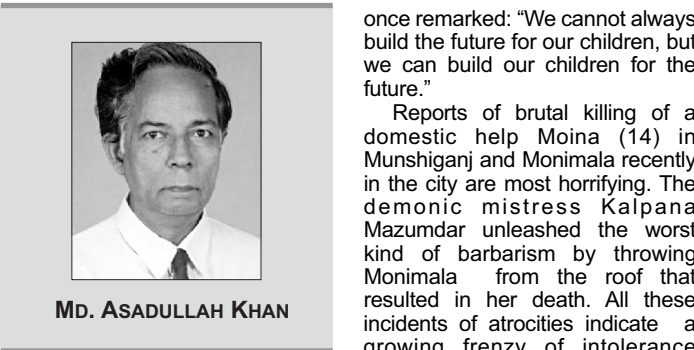
vations that market interests will dictate Russia's future foreign policy. Accordingly, the EU is waiting to see how Russia's 'near-abroad' policy and selective engagement will stand up to Russia's decision to raise export prices of its gas and also impose duties on the import of oil and other exports from Belarus to Moscow.

However, decision makers both in the EU and in Russia generally agree on one aspect – the need to re-define certain contents of any forthcoming agreement. It is clear that Russia has become hypersensitive about having EU-defined values imposed on it. It now wants to "cherry pick" only parts of the accord that might be useful for its economy. Such a situation has however created latent difficulties because the European parliament in particular considers values to be at the core of any external relationships.

tries tend to act less like a "unit", having diversified their trading partners. Russia is also aware that the EU has been actively encouraging such diversification with the support of the USA. To stem such erosion in linkages with Russia, Moscow is now attempting to enhance its sphere of influence through the providing of selective economic benefits in return for political loyalty.

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Increased focus on children needed



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industry, shrimp processing industries, glass factories, welding and metal workshops. Child labour is hardly a new concern, having been fiercely debated -- and mostly outlawed in the West in the last century. In the country, an estimated 30 million children are working under different vocations of whom 40 percent are on farms and about 20 percent on household jobs. Child labour problem is most common in

or working as bus helpers or even pulling rickshaws outnumber those 10,000 child workers just withdrawn from the garment factories.

The city's garbage dumps are home to many of them. There rubbish pickers spend their days sifting through mountains of obnoxious refuse, looking for recyclable objects such as glass, paper, polythene, cardboard, empty cans, metal and food rem-

nants. Doubtless, they make the best scavengers, they can scurry more easily among the piles of garbage. But how can society and the government face such a cruel fact that God's best creation, because they were born poor or with no father or no mother to support them in the most formative years of their lives, are destined to end up their lives in garbage dumps or cardboard shanties?

In a report released by an international NGO group in 1998 named "Anti-Slavery Society", it has been revealed that as many as 3 million children are working as

the fact that the country has stricter laws to stop such illegal trade and abuse, the administration during the last five years and earlier has hardly been able to ensure protection to these teenagers from exploitation or to arrest this trend of being trapped into such abominable trades.

The condition of the children lacking support of the family or parents beggars description. They wander homeless in the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong and other cities often surviving by thievery or begging in absence of any means of living. Although we talk glibly that

ers because they can be paid less and bullied into working longer hours without complaint.

The real reason children are allowed to work in underdeveloped countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Philippines is the indifference of the ruling elites to these impoverished groups. Shockingly, as things stand today in the country, certain kinds of children get the best education in the world. But there are others who are believed to be born to work with their hands and do not need any education. "The families of the child labourers are the same families who

Most of the children born of poor parents are never in a position to receive the most basic education. Ironically true, even when there has come about explosion of knowledge worldwide, education for the poor in Bangladesh is something we don't see as necessary at all. It's almost as if the poor don't have the same desires and aspirations as the rich.

speech, and their commendable effort of bringing the student-teacher ratio to 46: 1 from present 55: 1 to lure children of the poorest section to primary schools, there might be a change in the school dropout cases from now on.

The feeling of powerlessness that goes with being illiterate comes through loud and clear in any conversation with ordinary people and that emphasizes the need for a major improvement of the country's schooling system. Despite the fact that government in the last one decade launched the literacy drive through programmes like "Food for Education", "Total Literacy Movement" and now cash incentive for enrolment, success is still a far cry. However, much remains to be done in terms of action. Without confronting the alarming trend of the decline of teacher-pupil ratio, infrastructural facilities, appointing right type of people for primary schooling programme, and bringing about general improvement in the economic condition of the parents, and over all monitoring and surveillance in curbing the endemic corruption embedded in the programme, success in educating the children or alleviating poverty situation will remain an elusive proposition.

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to say that, at present, our people are in a mood, which comes rarely in the life of a country. They are looking forward to new direction, a new era; a new life.

It is time not merely for a new budget or a new licensing policy or a new price structure. It is perhaps the moment for shaping and molding a new society, for giving a new and clear orientation to the nation.

Let us remember that our society has to not only fight against the big time criminals masquerading as politicians, it has also to do away with the few hundred petty tyrants who mushroomed all over the country during the last couple of years.

The election could be made the matrix of a reborn nation. More important would be to establish Government of Bangladesh limited -- limited not in responsibility, but limited by the rule of law and the discipline of the constitution.

No government should treat the constitution as its private property, and our laws as its personal backyard. In the meantime, let us not subject ourselves to misplaced enthusiasm by overstretching the virtues of democracy.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.