

Outburst at Dhaka University

Move to remove army camp is welcome

We welcome the steps taken by the government to defuse the tension at Dhaka University. The decision to remove the army camp on the campus together with the initiation of a judicial inquiry, in addition to the army's investigation, into the worrying incidents of Monday and Tuesday will go a long way toward restoring normalcy in the university. It is also a sign that the military has opted for reconciliation rather than confrontation with the students. Through this mature decision it has upheld the greater interest of the country and has demonstrated its respect for broad public opinion.

There are some important lessons to be learnt from the disturbances at Dhaka University. It is clear that the army must go for a serious rethinking on how it should relate to the broad civilian population. Such rethinking must include the camps that have been set up in civilian population centres all over the country. Owing to the state of emergency and the resultant involvement of the army in a variety of activities --- administration, law and order, et al --- its leadership must devise a mode of engagement with the public that will have no room for any misunderstanding. After the ugly incident at DU, provoked by the behaviour of a few soldiers, it is necessary that the army go for not just damage control but also ensuring that such incidents do not happen again. There is always a distinction between the army as an institution and soldiers as individuals. Sometimes the questionable individual attitudes of ordinary soldiers undermine the reputation of the army as an institution. That being the reality, we would urge the army high command to revisit the entire issue of civil-military relations. It is particularly important because army camps are located outside the cantonments. Under no circumstances should the ties between the army and the civilian population be allowed to deteriorate.

While we are on the subject, we cannot but condemn the police action on the campus. The frenzy with which they went into action, through firing rubber bullets and truncheons, was totally uncalled for. It now makes sense to raise the question of who ordered the police into taking such action. Given the nature of the gymnasium incident, it was expected that the students would agitate. But that was hardly a reason for the police to confront them in battle mode. As for the students, much as we sympathise with their grievances, we cannot but register our grave displeasure with their behaviour, as demonstrated through such acts as a torching of vehicles on the roads. It certainly did not enhance their image and reputation. We hope they will desist from such violent behaviour in future. Finally, let us hope that calm returns to the campus.

August 21 grenade attack

Investigation should be concluded and trial held

THREE years into the August 21 grenade attack on an Awami League public meeting, progress in the investigation is still unclear while the families of the dead and the victims of the mayhem who were maimed and disabled continue to live their lives in agony and dire distress. It is shocking as to how vested quarters in the previous government had manipulated and derailed the investigation process, thereby blocking the path of justice. The so-called one-man commission report into the heinous attack that killed as many as 22 and injured 200 failed to point fingers at the possible culprits and perpetrators. It was content with merely making vague allegation of a 'foreign link'. No less than the top investigator of the case, a senior CID official, now says, "We never saw the report and the government never informed us about it". As a matter of fact, all that the officials concerned and high profile spokesmen of the past regime did was to make all kinds of statements that were simply confusing and made matters even murkier.

The 21 August grenade attack is one of the most horrific of terrorist acts in the country since liberation. The best way we could redress the grievances of the victims, at least to some extent, is to promptly complete the investigations and bring the culprits to book.

We urge the government to give top priority to completing the process of investigation with all the neutrality and impartiality it commands. The investigation, needless to say, must be flawless and contain nothing but the whole truth. It should basically identify and address the gaps and lapses that have occurred as a result of undue interference or manipulation on the part of political functionaries and government officials of the past regime.

Bringing the investigations to expeditious conclusion with trial held and conviction delivered is no less important than the anti-corruption drive; for it has implications for the security and image of the country.

Why blame others if you lose the way?



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

LAW and Information Adviser Mainul Hosein is unhappy with the way things have been going for the government he is part of. Not long ago, he told us in no uncertain terms that it was the responsibility of the people of Bangladesh to ensure that the government did not fail in doing its job. And now he thinks that a deep conspiracy is abroad in the land to undermine the government. The conspirators, he would like us to know, are the politicians against whom charges of corruption have been filed. Now that is quite a revealing nugget of information.

It is so because many of the politicians he speaks of are in prison. It is, therefore, not quite conceivable how men held securely in the confines of jail can wreck the policies of a government that has busily been going about expanding its mandate, with little thought to the consequences. And the politicians who have so far managed to stay free? The emergency has herded them into a state of silence, though it is quite true that the "reformists" among them

have all been singing praises of the government for nearly everything it has been doing, or not doing.

And that leads us all to what is clearly a conundrum for the country. If the adviser truly believes that the politicians are keeping the government from doing its job, he and his colleagues must seriously get into the business of unearthing the nature of the conspiracy. It is not enough to smell a conspiracy but then come up with little to show for what the "conspirators" have actually been up to. But since society does not run on sweeping generalisations, and politics is poorly served through a search for scapegoats on the part of those from whom people had expected better, we would like to think that the law adviser was not being serious when he spoke of that conspiracy. And yet that would not be a healthy way of observing conditions, for when we hear responsible government functionaries speak of the issues, we tend to think their comments are being made after much thinking and rethinking has been expended on it.

That is where we run into a different problem altogether. And it is simply this, that the thinking and rethinking may really not be what it seems to be. Take that

other comment of the adviser. He is unhappy that the nation's economists have not exactly come forth with the kind of advice and wisdom the government expected from them. And the upshot of it all? The government is not doing a good job because of the conspiring politicians and the indifferent economists. In a sudden leap of imagination, then, we have been enlightened on why the government is not being able to handle its job. The responsibility for all the lapses lies with others. Do not blame the government.

It is a rather strange attitude that has lately been shaping up as policy. We have spoken earlier of the finance adviser letting us in on the wonderful news that prices of essential commodities have been rising because the purchasing power of the people has gone up. That kind of remark leaves the poor and the middle classes reeling from a different kind of pain. We call that a body blow. Here you have millions of people wondering where their next meal will come from; the middle classes are in a clear state of fright about an inevitable surge in prices come Ramadan, and yet we are being educated by those who ought to have made life easier for us on how price rises in Bangladesh are quite in

step with those in the rest of the world.

Let us face it. The government that runs the show in Bangladesh today ought to have done a better job. That it has not, of course, has reasons, none of which can be attributed to a lack of support from the people, or from different sectors of society. Go looking for the reasons and you will likely find them just beyond your courtyard. A prime reason happens to be the systematic mauling that the political classes have been subjected to, all because some very enthusiastic individuals happen to believe that politics has been behind all the mess we are in. Do you see how corruption and politics have thus been made synonymous? This failure to distinguish between corrupt politicians and political idealism has led the caretaker government up against a cul de sac. Why blame others if you lose the way?

Part of a government's job is never to lose the audience. Government ought to be, and always, a thriving, throbbing enterprise. When the Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government took charge in January this year, there was that spark that told us in no ambiguous terms it was going to be a thriving and throbbing experience. It went

after the corrupt with much-needed frenzy, and it spoke of holding elections that would be acceptable to the nation as a whole. And then something began to go wrong. At this point in time, it is quite possible that matters are beginning to go haywire.

You have a continuing ban on indoor politics. You do not really argue against such a condition, until you begin to spot the pretty crude manner in which young men on motorcycles, with the men and the motorcycles all affiliated to a new party formed despite the state of emergency, let you know that some are more equal than others. The Progressive Democratic Party happily goes around telling the country that it has arrived. Call that arrivist politics.

But the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party? They cannot do politics, for obvious reasons. Understood, but when you go a little further and tell them that they can distribute relief to flood victims only if they carry no party banners, you are making sure that a level playing field is not exactly what the country might expect. Of course, we will have elections by the end of next year. But will someone reassure us that when that moment of reckoning arrives, Bengalis will not be treated to a local version of the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid), with a Shaukat Aziz epitomising the hollowness that is non-politics?

Part of the objective reality we ought not to miss. Thousands of hawkers have led a precarious existence since they were driven

off the pavements of the city. In these last many weeks, thousands upon thousands of jute mills workers have wearily trudged back home, in the heart-breaking knowledge that the mills that once employed them will operate no more. Citizens who have spent years collecting prize bonds, as a measure of economic security for themselves, are being told they must cough up a levy on them.

If that is dispiriting, there is worse that may yet be, for the government plans to go after private tuition and coaching centres. Yes, we will have quality education by all means. But does anyone in the administration know that the educated young men and women who tutor school children in their homes come from poor, lower middle class, families and need that teaching experience and the paltry amount of money coming with it to survive? And what justification can a government have to shut down institutions that impart teaching and do nothing that impinges on morality? Government creates jobs. It has no business taking them away.

Government, sir, is a serious matter. Competence and a comprehension of the bare truth are what you expect from it. If those are not forthcoming, you know once more what disillusionment is.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

GROUND REALITIES

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Difference of opinion



HARUN UR RASHID

THE recent overnight meeting between Prime Minister Gordon Brown and President Bush at Camp David has demonstrated that they speak different languages on the issues confronting the world. Although the goals are the same, they look at the issues from different perspectives.

Brown went to Washington as part of his trip to the UN, and not solely to meet President Bush. That shows his priority.

Brown made it clear that he was not Tony Blair. He is known to be intellectually brighter than his predecessor, less personally effusive towards Bush's policies than Blair, and looks at global issues with penetrating insight and a critical eye.

The first signal to the White

House that Brown was a different person came when his aides indicated that he did not wish to appear in casual dress at a press conference, as Blair did with Bush. Both the leaders wore dark suits. This sent a strong message to the White House that the press conference was business, not pleasure.

The personal chemistry between Tony Blair and President Bush is gone. Brown wanted to be different from Tony Blair because of the political damage that any similarity might bring for him in Britain. Tony Blair suffered because of his closeness to President Bush, and Brown gave no indication that he would replicate that relationship with Bush.

It is noted that Tony Blair was removed not by his parliamentary party but by the people. Labour

under Blair was losing popularity in the country, losing local elections, and he had to go. This was the reverse of Margaret Thatcher's exit in 1990, when parliamentary members removed Thatcher, although she did not lose popularity among the people.

What differences of opinion are there?

Brown has avoided using the term "war on terror," and has said that terror was not a cause, it was a crime. The frontline against terrorism is Afghanistan and not Iraq. In Britain, he instructed his ministers not to use the phrase "war on terror," and, indeed, the British officials were no longer to even use the word "Muslim" in connection with terrorism.

Probably no political leader

has more eloquently made the case that terrorism presents a

mortal threat to the West, and to democratic values everywhere, than President Bush.

Bush certainly continues to insist that the frontline against terrorism is in Iraq, and that the war on terrorism would continue. His administration has now substituted the term "long war" for "global war on terrorism."

While Brown made it clear that the two countries have a strong alliance and common values, he stopped short of a personal endorsement of Mr. Bush's approach to terrorism. President Bush was clearly aware that Prime Minister Brown was walking a fine line, and made a point of saying that Britain was as important to the US, as it was the other way round.

Brown made it clear, at a

speech at the UN, that his policy was different from that of the

US's. Brown listed terrorism alongside other "great challenges" requiring the allies to work together: (a) nuclear proliferation, (b) climate change, (c) global poverty and (d) the Middle East peace process.

Brown has called for a "moral" crusade to deliver global pledges to tackle poverty and disease in the developing world. Emphatically, he said: "We cannot allow our promises that become pledges to descend into just aspirations, and then wishful thinking, and then only words that symbolize broken promises."

The above policy is far removed from the American strategy of priority of closer engagement with terrorism. The other issues come later.

Brown, for the most part, used careful language to describe the global issues, including the threat of terrorism. Brown has sobered up the atmospherics of British-US relations. He has brought to the relationship a new and skeptical eye. About Brown, the Economist says: "Like Mr. Blair and Mr. Bush, he is a Christian, but he seems to see the world more through the economic prism of GDP and jobs than the religious lens of good

martial law. In recent months, the army's standing has greatly eroded -- because of its increasing intrusion into civilian authority, its public exposure, and its handling of the Lal Masjid crisis.

Eight years ago, many Pakistanis accepted the coup out of disgust with the corrupt governance of civilian leaders.

But his regime betrayed its promises to cleanse governance, make the rich pay taxes, oppose extremism, and be transparent in implementing "free-market" policies.

For instance, the Accountability Commission became a farce. Gen. Musharraf tried to strike deals with pro-extremist clerics. There were scandals in public enterprises' privatisation. Now, there's widespread disillusionment with the military.

A poll by the US-based International Republican Institute found that Gen. Musharraf's approval ratings dipped to 34 percent from 60 in mid-2006. Fifty-eight percent of respondents gave the army-dominated regime poor/very poor marks; 56 percent said they felt less safe than a year ago.

Worse, this would help the army entrench itself in a prominent political role just as it's losing its relevance. This would undermine some major gains the pro-democratisation movement has made.

Regrettably, despite Gen. Musharraf's ambivalent record

vis-à-vis the Taliban, and his agencies' role in Afghanistan, external factors favour him. The three nations that matter the most to Pakistan -- the US, China and India -- certainly do.

This is understandable in

the case of the US

which follows a myopic policy guided by its Global War on Terror (GWOT) in which Gen. Musharraf remains its best ally. It wants to shore up his sinking support-base through an alliance with Ms. Bhutto.

This will make it doubly difficult

for Mr. Sharif to return home.

Gen. Musharraf bears an ani-

mus against him.

Whatever Mr.

Sharif's faults -- there are many -- his continued exile will set back

democratisation.

It'd be tragic if the PPP,

Pakistan's largest party, were to

reach such a compromise, which

might cause it to split.

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declared (July 29) that "the worst is over" for Musharraf; there's been no "major dent" in his influence because he accepted the chief justice's reinstatement "with grace."

Besides echoing the dominant US view of Gen. Musharraf's indispensability, this expresses cynicism towards the Pakistani public's aspirations.

A survey of South Asia's democratisation by India's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies suggests that the democratic aspirations of ordinary Pakistanis are no weaker than those of Indians or Nepalis.

One must wish them success in making Pakistan a full-fledged democracy, with a functioning party system which responds to their wishes on the basis of accountability, not benevolent military paternalism.

That certainly conforms to the dominant view held within India's establishment.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Pakistan at democracy's crossroads



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

However, India's pro-Musharraf position is much less understandable or justifiable. India has a long-term stake in a democratic, stable Pakistan which can rein in the military and its secret services, which nurture a strong anti-India prejudice -- probably a more extreme obverse of the anti-Pakistan attitude of their Indian counterparts. That certainly conforms to the dominant view held within India's establishment.

exercised through threats and a 17 minutes-long 2 a.m. telephone call by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Secondly, he probably didn't want to risk inflaming popular opinion against the army. Another eruption of protest would have robbed his regime of whatever's left of its legitimacy.

A just-released Indian Express-CNN-IBN-CSDS-Dawn survey says 55.4 percent of Pakistanis want him to quit as army chief before the presidential elections; only 29.6 percent