

## The call of Lailatul Baraat

A night when Muslims redeem themselves

MUSLIMS all across the world will observe Lailatul Baraat as the day draws to a close this evening. When night descends on the world, they will recall the Almighty and His munificence and will offer up prayers to Him in all their gratitude, seeking His blessings for the year ahead. Of much more importance, though, is that on this night Muslims will devote themselves to penance and a seeking of forgiveness from the Almighty for the sins they have committed, especially in the year gone by. It is this awareness of sin and the knowledge that such sin must not be committed anew that will drive souls tonight into a fresh consciousness of the role that spirituality can play in their lives. Beyond the temporal world, with all its mundane realities, among which come a sordid array of temptations, exists a world we know not and yet we understand that the idea of such a world all so often gives us a sense of it in our inner being.

But that feeling of the spiritual cannot be limited to the prayers of a single night. Lailatul Baraat is not merely about a nightlong remembrance of the Lord of the Universe to be followed by days of business as usual. Indeed, it is a reminder to people everywhere that truth and justice, a sense of fellowship among people everywhere, and overall the acknowledgement of the conviction that we are all brothers on the earth together, brothers who know they are truly brothers, are what really matter. Lailatul Baraat is about recalling our ancestors who once walked the earth and praying for the salvation of their souls. It is a point in time when we need to help the poor. And as we help the poor, we also know in the core of our being that it remains the collective task of men and women to create for themselves a caring, well-meaning, purposeful and enlightened society. Each of us, as individuals, can complement another and thereby construct a chain that will lead to a wholesome human linkage attuned to the higher calling of the Almighty.

On this night, Muslims will also reflect on the challenges they face as a community across diverse regions of the globe. The negative connotations that have unfortunately and unjustifiably come to be associated with their faith as a result of the rise of fanaticism in their midst is a strong message that Islam needs to reassert itself as a religion of peace. In simple terms, the message ought to be without ambiguity -- that on Lailatul Baraat Muslims everywhere pledge to redeem themselves in line with the noble teachings of their faith and put themselves to a constant test through practising those teachings.

## Telecom and Internet chaos must be avoided

Secure optic cable network by all means

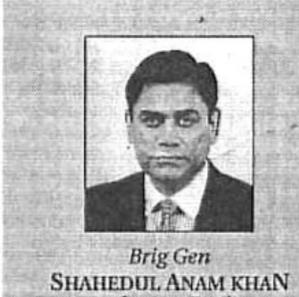
FOR the second time in a week, Bangladesh's connectivity with outside world was disrupted -- thanks to the snapping of the optic fibre link to the submarine cable network. The trouble spot has been identified and repair work undertaken since Monday night under the supervision of the technical experts of BTTB.

The snapped cable was exposed due to heavy rains and had cut marks inflicted apparently by some heavy and sharp weapons like a spade or an axe. Three possibilities are being talked about: one, stealing the wire rather wrongly thinking it contains a lot of copper which is not the case though; two, an attempted subversion of the cable connectivity by some criminals, and last but not least, lack of surveillance and maintenance exposing the fragile parts of the fibre inviting piracy.

Evidently, the incidents raise serious questions about making a short shrift of the country's fibre optic connectivity which ought to have been a top security and maintenance concern for the BTTB because of the dividends it pays. The resultant effects of disruption in the cable network services are multidimensional. Submarine cable network is Bangladesh's gateway to the information superhighway, a vital link in the creation of a knowledge-based society. But in establishing this connectivity we have wasted a decade already, so that we need to make up for the lost time through an uninterrupted use of this speedy communication mode. The link is also of vital importance to the business community enabling them to communicate speedily, effectively and efficiently with the outside world round the clock. As for the BTTB itself, disruption of the network deprives it of a revenue of US\$70,000 every hour.

We thus urge the government that foolproof security measures be put in place forthwith in order to prevent recurrence of dislocations in the cable network services. Side by side, we should also seriously consider the possibility of a back up fibre optic connection to the submarine cable network which we understand had been proposed jointly by Power Grid Company Ltd and Bangla Phone to the BTTB.

## This should never have happened

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## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

The report of a move to destabilise the government by fomenting student unrest, or exploiting it, is deeply alarming too. The detractors and the mischief-mongers will always look for opportunities to direct any unrest to suit their interests. What the government cannot afford to do is to provide them the chance to implement their designs. The art is to never allow such situations to occur in the first place; pre-emption is better than damage control.

I must cause all right thinking persons to ask why a fracas between some army persons and university students turned into violent protests that witnessed wide-scale vandalism and destruction, which could only be controlled through imposition of curfew.

One could ask why the students' anger did not subside once very high-ranking officers of the army visited the spot and assured the students of appropriate actions against the errant soldiers, and that the army billet located at the gym would be withdrawn. In fact, all the logical demands of the students were accepted. Why then the events of August 21 and 22?

I ask this not as an ex-soldier nor as an ex-student of Dhaka University nor as a journalist, but as an ordinary citizen of the country whose son or daughter was not there suffering the baton of the police, or waiting despondently to rush home when the curfew was imposed, but could well have been; whose vehicle was not one of the several hundred destroyed by the

frenzied mob whom I hesitate to call students, but could well have been; who was not among the journalists picked up from the streets on their way home from office on the first night of curfew and beaten up by the law enforcers who couldn't care any less even after being given the journalists' identity but could well have been.

It was deeply distressing to see the acts of destruction and the people in uniform being set upon, as well as the rough treatment of the students by the law enforcing agencies. This should never have happened.

One could also ask why the army had to camp in an area inside the university precincts, and that too near a facility frequented by the students? Even during the best of peaceful times it was not considered as even the remotest of options. It was not good judgment, but I am loathe to hold the army authorities solely responsible for it.

I wonder whether the army post could be placed there without the assent of the university authorities. But the VC and pro-VC and all those relevant personalities amongst the

teachers, should have considered the possible demerits of having the post located where it was. Gaining familiarity may have been an objective, but what the decision makers forgot was that too much of it breeds contempt. Regrettably, plenty of it has been generated by the recent events. This must not be allowed to continue.

One could well ask why the police forgot the cardinal principle of crowd control, which is that it is not taking precipitate actions but withholding from doing so that most often helps in quelling a brewing situation. They also forgot the most important dictum of application of force, which is that it must never be disproportionate to the threat being faced.

What was the need to chase the students inside their dorms and to throw innumerable tear shells inside student dormitories? These are all a matter of application of the mind of the commander on the spot, and appreciation of the situation is but a subjective exercise. But caution and restraint rather than reckless and uninhibited action pay dividends in the long run. The

latter causes everybody distress and some of us are left to rue. This propensity of the law enforcers to resort to disproportionate force, must not be allowed to prevail over their faculty of thought.

One could well ask why the teachers had to add their demands to those of the students' at that particular time and in that situation. Teachers are the conscience of the society and the university teachers, although split up in groups representing almost all the colours of the rainbow, are respectable and revered citizens too. They are not alone in their conviction that the country must go back to democratic governance and like the rest of us want the emergency to end as soon as possible.

But I ask why is it that they did not come out with their demands earlier instead of waiting for an inflammable situation such as this, to ventilate their opinion? Did it not add fuel to the burning cinder?

One would have expected saner action, under the circumstances, to assuage the situation. The teachers' demand did not help to do so.

But one could also ask whether

nocturnal raids to arrest the university teachers could have been avoided? This has created panic amongst the teachers and reportedly many of them prefer these days to spend the nights elsewhere. This is reminiscent of the dark days under the Pakistan army. This should be avoided at all costs.

While one cannot take issue with the government for its decision to impose curfew as an immediate control measure, one could well question the rationale of advising the media, through what many see as a veiled threat, of the merit of imposing self-censorship under the present circumstances. In fact, two private TV channels were conveyed directly to refrain telecasting any "provocative news, documentaries, talk shows and discussions against the government."

Reports designed to deliberately provoke must not be encouraged but why should the government consider itself above criticism? The media project public opinion, and good governance depends largely on taking into account what the common person feels about government policies and actions. Particularly, under the currently unique dispensation, one would have thought that the media's role would be taken in the right perspective, the criticisms more objectively.

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The art is to never allow such situations to occur in the first place; pre-emption is better than damage control. The view that the incident had been designed to pit the public against the army may not be ill-founded. That is a situation that must never be allowed to happen. The truth must be unearthed and made public.

However, we must look objectively at the recent incident. It would be wrong to dismiss it as only an engineered act to bring down the government or to compel army takeover. As for those who see it as only an outburst of pent up resentment against the government look at it only partially. I feel that there is bit of both in what we saw on the August 20, and the day after. The causative factors should be addressed to prevent this being repeated.

There is no short cut to democracy, and we would like to go back to the democratic ways and let the politicians run the show. But if democratic governance is the people's desire, it is also their wish neither to go back to the politics of the past nor to have the country's politics entrusted to those who have failed the people. Therefore, it is imperative that the move to reform politics and political parties is not sidetracked or derailed.

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## The lighthouse that education once was ...



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

## GROUND REALITIES

And pursuit of the unknown has, to our discomfiture, come to something of a screeching halt. The enlightened principal of a school in this city once asked a student, a teenaged girl, why she seemed apathetic to a study of history. "Look," said the girl in tones that bordered on the uncouth and the rude, "history is about the past. We live in the present. Why must we be bothered about the past?"

subject and so needed a few grace marks to be able to get through. When that happened, sadly enough, his position swiftly went down to a third division. And, of course, there were a whole lot of other people who failed overall and, thus, had to go for a second attempt a year later, if they were so inclined.

The beauty of the old system was that a clear differentiation in merit was noticeable through the marks. It was a sense of competition that mattered. A student coming by 68 percent of marks in his English papers at the HSC examinations generally felt disappointed that he was still behind another, who had managed to score 69 percent.

And that kind of score in English was, and remains, almost a record where school and college level education in this country is concerned. The upshot of it was that scores of students could obtain first division marks, but despite this sort of uniformity there were yet the many differences in scores that separated one student from another.

And that were other pretty positive aspects of SSC and HSC examinations as well in that era. To go through a subject successfully, one needed to obtain a minimum of 33 percent of marks in the examinations. Anything less was considered a failure. If the score was far below 33 percent, the admissibility of grace marks simply did not arise. But if the gap between 33 and the actual score was small, there was a good possibility that the candidate would pull through.

Another pretty interesting aspect of examinations in those days was the broad questions. It was, now that we think of it, an extremely efficacious way of testing the student's intellect. The argument in those days was that objective questions, or questions that called for short, precise answers, were not really a credible way of judging the ability of a student. And that was a reason why students were made to go through the entirety of their syllabi as they prepared for the examinations.

But all those realities are, today, tales of a past that people in these present times would rather do without. Where, in the old days, guardians proudly informed relatives and friends of the letters and star marks their children had achieved at the examinations, today

it is all a question of a GPA and a certain number attached to it.

For those steeped in old methods of living, among which is clearly a traditional, almost fanatical, devotion to old methods of examination, such a manner of scoring is something that is not quite comprehensible. Some may even be willing and ready to inform you that it is clearly unacceptable.

Whether or not you accept the new, or recall with fondness the system that once nurtured you, is a different matter altogether. But what you most certainly will have reservations about is the rapidity with which education in Bangladesh has taken a new dimension altogether in the last few years.

In the first place, the bang with which private universities came into the academic scene over the last decade, or slightly more, has made the ground shift somewhat where students' perceptions of their future is concerned. Almost all of these universities have placed regular, repeated, and increased emphasis on a study of essentially two subjects, namely, information technology and business administration.

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And that is something of a braindead educational base that once, in its thriving form, so amply turned out idealists, dreamers, indeed people who not only shaped a view of what life ought to be but also strove hard to forge a worldview for themselves. And that was done through a long, hard study of such subjects as literature, political science, philosophy, history, indeed the entire gamut of social sciences.

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## AS I SEE IT

Faced with the choice of fighting the elections in "civvies" or looking for a safe exit, anyone in Musharraf's position (and given his personality) will take the former option. On the other hand, there is that outside chance of his going the "Pinochet" route by retaining the COAS slot, remaining the power behind the throne. This calls for the president's slot being occupied by whom he considers most loyal, the bonus being that person being also preferable to everyone, and mainly the US.

Minister Shaukat Aziz. In the face of political boondoggling of the elected PMs, Musharraf was the preference of many voters in the years immediately following 1999, even without the exercise of a mandate.

He preferred to remain in power not through an electoral process, which at that time he could have conceivably got, but through the source of his power, the Pakistan army.

In an indirect way, but with considerable manipulation and rigging, the voters did give him a sanction of sorts in late 2002. Gerrymandering the vote is not a Pakistani phenomenon alone, it is the done thing in most third world countries. Indeed, as we saw in the US presidential elections in 2000,

the PM, Shaukat Aziz has been God-sent for the business community as the guarantor of business-friendly policies. He had already mastered the art of political "client-patron" relationship he first learnt during his banking career.

Remaining a faithful client to his patron, Gen Musharraf, on the one hand, he has generously distributed to his clients, among them army officers, both retired and serving, and technocrat friends and supporters, offices of profit both in public sphere and state owned enterprises, particularly financial institutions.

Over the years he has built a vast constituency. The uniformed client has been very "lucky" in multiplying his investment through "sound advice," and a little "bit of help," very much like bureaucrats were made to win at cards in the 50s and 60s. As a fairly wealthy individual himself, money and greed has never been his weakness, despite the occasional grumblings of the political machine he has managed to survive (and survive with some political dignity) till the end of his term.

The only president-PM combination that has lasted its life in office is that of Musharraf and Shaukat. This dream team was very much the choice of the US, and that support was vital for its longevity. However, one thing rankles American democratic sensibilities, Musharraf and Shaukat Aziz were not elected in the pure democratic sense, they were actually selected, Musharraf by circumstances and Shaukat Aziz by

Musharraf. It would be crass to deny that this horses for courses team has succeeded at least in the economic sense.

Even without a political constituency, Shaukat has been a consummate politician. To have survived three years in the political labyrinth of Pakistan, keeping both the army and the bureaucracy happy, and the political wolves from his door, has been no mean achievement.

Observers have also noted that none of the political leaders, including the two major opposition figures, Ms Benazir and Mian Nawaz Sharif, have shown any visceral hatred for Shaukat Aziz, as opposed to their feelings towards Musharraf (and towards each other). Was it because he, as their private banker, knows too much?

Musharraf would be happy if the present combination continues. If he is forced to accept a political PM who comes to the seat of power in free and fair elections, Shaukat will probably replace Mohammad Mian Soomro as chairman senate, one heartbeat from the presidency. On the other hand, Shaukat Aziz could well continue as PM if no political party emerges with outright majority, a compromise

Ikram Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.