

Exit the tigers, enter the dragon

SHAHER ZAIDI

SOMETHING has been gnawing at me for many weeks now. Like the catchphrase of mystery novels, it can be defined as: "Where's Jamaat?" Not that Jamaat is invisible or in hiding (far from it), but that they seem completely untouched in the current chess game.

The fact that Jamaat alone has been enjoying a special "untouchable" status since January 11 has been documented and discussed in exhaustive detail in the media. The response to this double standard is usually of two types.

First, there is the popular mythology that since Jamaat is the party of God and their slogan is "We Want Honest People's Rule," they have remained clean and above everything. Second, there is a senior advisor's response that the CTG is indeed being fair, and not protecting Jamaat in any fashion (BNP used to say the same about Islamic militants).

Looking at the first myth, newspapers have reported ample evidence that Jamaat's hands were also dirty in the unprecedented looter state set up in last five years. In an in-depth research report, Samakal newspaper has published an extensive report on allegations

and cases against Jamaat MPs ("The Country In Grip of Jamaat Blueprint", 9/9/07). Out of the 17 recent Jamaat MPs, Samakal reported that there were allegations of bribery against half of them.

Cases have been filed alleging extortion (Mujahid), stealing relief tin (Maulana Abdus Sobhan, Maulana Abdul Aziz), extortion and giving false wealth statements to ACC (Shahjahan Chowdhury), lobbying and extortion (Dr. Syed Abdullah Taher), looting of 30 lakh taka from Asif Jute Mill and patronising militant group JanaJuddho (Golam Sarwar), and extortion (Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid).

Of these accused, very few have been arrested or have surrendered to the court, and most appear to be in hiding or otherwise remain beyond the reach (or the attention) of the authorities.

Not just individuals, but also companies with known or alleged Jamaat links have been spared from the current war against corruption. Islami Bank has been charged with opaque financial transactions regarding mysterious bank accounts that are suspected of funding militant groups. Yet Islami Bank remains intact and untouched. Another allegedly Jamaat-affiliated company BD Foods has been caught in a major drug trafficking scandal in England,

but it remains in healthy condition in Bangladesh. Contrast this with the zeal with which we went after Rangs Tower, not even giving them the seven requested days to clear out equipment, resulting in crores of losses to the county.

The wheels of justice turn slow, admittedly, but they seem to turn exceedingly slow when it comes to Jamaat-e-Islami. While BNP and AL leaders who are subject to lawsuits are in jail, facing speedy sentencing, or forbidden from leaving or entering the country, no such bar appears for JI members.

High profile cases have been filed against top leadership, including provoking the bloody Paltan Maidan clash between AL and Jamaat (Nizami, Mujahid, Kamaruzzaman) and the grenade attack on AL rally (Nizami, Mujahid, Abdul Kader Mollah). In addition, there have been many allegations and reports of corruption and irregularities in the ministries headed by the Jamaat, but precious little action has been taken in this regard.

In spite of the pending cases, both Nizami and Mujahid have been able to travel abroad, with no shadow of impending arrest or even restriction on their movements similar to those facing much less serious charges.

More opaque are the long-

running allegations linking Jamaat to militant Islamic groups. While no solid link has been proven, Siddiqur Rahman Bangla Bhai said in his confessional statement that he used to support Jamaat's student wing Shibir, before striking out on his own. At the least, Jamaat is guilty of downplaying and obstructing these issues, as when Nizami called it an "Indian" conspiracy and later said: "Bangla Bhai is a media creation." But while the CTG is investigating BNP links to fomenting radical groups, JI remains outside the spotlight.

There are several explanations for the get-out-of-jail-free card given to Jamaat. First, there is a growing theory that there are Jamaat supporters inside the administration, who are protecting JI from prosecution. Jamaat has very carefully infiltrated all levels of administration with their loyalists in the last five years. A vast bureaucratic machine continues to hold the real levers to power, and can do a lot to shield people.

Second, it is possible that fear of antagonising the so-called "Islamic bloc" is making the government shy away from prosecuting Jamaat. But prosecutors need to remember, as even ulema have discussed, that Jamaat is only a political party. It is neither the custodian, nor the sole proprietor, of Islam. Besides, nothing can be more Islamic than

prosecuting those who carry out abuses of law and power while hiding under the shield of religion.

Third, of course, is the immense patronage this party has historically enjoyed from Gulf states. But it's really high time we stop bowing to oil money, especially at a historic juncture when it is our migrant labour that is keeping those nations economies running.

Fourth, the US-led "war on terror" has set many misguided ideas in motion. One of these is the theory that Western nations need to maintain good relations with the so-called "moderate Muslim" political parties, in order to use them against the "militant" Islamic parties. Jamaat has played this card shrewdly so far, and it is possible that Western powers want them to be "left alone" as part of a theory that if Jamaat splinters, more radical groups will be born. Dear Embassy Row, you've backed the wrong horse – again.

Jamaat is one of the shrewdest operators in our political space. They are true survivors. They joined hands with the Pakistan army in 1971, and they have given support to other autocratic, anti-people forces since then. But every time, when that force has fallen from power, Jamaat has come out unscathed and smelling like rose water. Even though they were the primary minority partner in the last



PHOTO: AFP

regime, Jamaat once again stands untouched.

Jamaat has cleverly and expeditiously switched sides to put themselves in the drivers seat again. Otherwise, what to make of the recent expulsion of the RU teachers, before the investigation against them was completed? This was done by a predominantly Jamaat syndicate which only a year ago was actively shielding the

alleged killer of Prof. Abu Taher. Or what to make of the EC's meetings with Masjid Mission, which is a Jamaat organisation run by Golam Azam's brother-in-law. Or what of the Prothom Alo report of Shibir students' involvement in drawing up voter lists (which ended in a violent conflict at RU).

Whether the CTG intends to or not, their actions are benefiting Jamaat. The more level-headed

people inside this administration need to apply an even-handed approach to investigating allegations against all Jamaat leaders and organisations. Jamaat loyalists must be stopped from spreading their sphere of influence. Otherwise the current "rule of law" campaign runs the risk of ending up delivering us into an Islamist state.

The writer is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Malaysian misery

PORIMOL PALMA

EVERYBODY looks at the bundle of money that the overseas workers, mainly the poor people of the country, send back home, but no one inquires what working conditions they undergo and ultimately how they actually benefit from their employment far from their relatives and homeland.

Starting from the rural and urban brokers, the recruiting agents at home and the outsourcing or recruiting agents abroad, their sub-agents or brokers and the employers -- all take the best out of the workers who sell cows and land and even borrow at high rates to raise money for a dream job.

The state, which is ultimately responsible to protect its fellow citizens, also seemed to be helpless in bringing an end to gross violations of the workers' rights that has been going on in Malaysia since the manpower export began in a fresh manner last August.

Only one example of the Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia very well illustrates a picture of how desperate they could be for their due rights. The workers who went on hunger strike for five days until last Friday said they wanted to die but would not return to their workplaces where their employers gave them only one meal a day and lower pay for longer hours than what they were promised.

This is however not an isolated incident. There were a number of reports published by the media that apart from violating such job contracts, the outsourcing com-

panies hired more workers and hid them in the closed buildings and even in the jungles.

Experts in the manpower business said such incidents of low pay and violation of contract take place as some recruiting agents and their brokers exaggerate the salaries and other facilities when they woo the workers

Thus, when workers find that they are not getting the salaries as promised or are forced to work for longer hours, they usually get agitated.

"The salary we get could be enough only for our meal and pocket money here. We spent Tk 2.3 lakh. What shall we send home?" one of the 121 workers

saying that this leads to a situation where the workers become just like victims of trafficking.

As per the Malaysian rule, outsourcing companies can hire workers from Bangladesh through recruiting agencies of Bangladesh. These companies sign contracts with the principal companies (factories or farms) to



PHOTO: JESSICA LIM REAL PICTURE

before they leave for the overseas workplaces.

"The recruiting agents while dealing with hundreds of workers' recruitment issues also do not check the job contracts on one-to-one basis. On the other hand, there are also workers who just believe the words of the agents about their jobs and salaries," said a recruiting agent.

demonstrating in the premises of Bangladesh High Commission asked when he was interviewed by BBC Bangla Service last Saturday.

A migrants' rights organisation working in Malaysia, Tenaganita, recently conducted a survey on Malaysia's recruitment process of Bangladeshi workers, and blamed the outsourcing system,

supply workers, and are responsible for the workers' salaries, lodging, transport, medical expenses, and insurance.

There were, however, a number of cases where the workers complained that the companies did not pay them in due time and deducted money on various charges like electricity, water, medical, and meal.

"For no reason, the authorities deduct money from salaries. They even deduct as fine the price if a small part of a machine is destroyed," a written complaint of a group of exploited workers to Bangladesh High Commission said in June.

"According to our job contracts signed in Bangladesh, our basic salary was fixed at 18.50 Ringgit, but on arrival in Malaysia, we had to sign a new contract form that fixed the daily basic salary at 15 Ringgit," the complaint added.

The organisation that found massive irregularities in the outsourcing system reported that the outsourcing companies had to pay between 1,500 and 2,000 Ringgit (Tk 30,000 to Tk 40,000) to the Malaysian Home Ministry and spend 1,000 to 2,000 Ringgit (Tk 20,000 to Tk 40,000) as "lobbyist fee."

Tenaganita, which conducted the survey report after interviewing 150 jobless and stranded workers and studying 36 cases of the workers, also said around 1,000 workers had been stuck in various places in western Malaysia in May/June this year.

A human rights activist in Malaysia said the outsourcing companies hire more workers than that of the actual demand of the factories or farms or hire workers against fake demand letters, which leads to such a situation.

"The Bangladesh High Commission that inspects the workplaces must have made mistakes in inspecting factories for which the outsourcing companies got scope to cheat the workers," he said.

The newspapers, including The Daily Star, also reported

several times of incidents that Bangladeshi workers got stuck at Kuala Lumpur International Airport for weeks which was again proved by a report of a Malaysian newspaper, The Star, that thousands of foreign workers, mostly Bangladeshis, were forced to camp in a car-park at the airport as their employers did not pick them up.

Around 400 Bangladeshis were also deported from Kuala Lumpur due to mismatches of their fingerprints, but the government is yet to find out any reasons behind it.

While such are the circumstances with regard to manpower export in Malaysia, the government, which takes pride in sending more workers abroad in short time and of swelling foreign exchange reserves, has not taken any significant actions to bring an end to violations of the workers. Since August last year, over 150,000 workers have gone to Malaysia.

Acting secretary of the expatriates' welfare ministry, Abdul Matin Chowdhury, however said a government delegation led by him earlier visited Malaysia and held talks with Malaysian home and labour ministries. "We are now again going to Malaysia to find reasons behind repeated incidents of such nature. The Malaysian home minister is also coming early next month, which proves that they are also interested to solve the problems arisen."

Let us hope that the latest efforts bear fruit. The plight of our overseas workers has gone unredressed far too long.

Porimol Palma is Staff Correspondent, The Daily Star.

What are you up to, comrades?

Enough is enough. Such violence is not only shameful but also inexcusable. The Dolakha incident, if ignored, will leave an indelible scar on the psyche of the CDOs and civil servants across the country and could have ramifications beyond our imagination.

AKHILESH TRIPATHI

WITHIN days of Maoist chairman Prachanda's emphatic call for the inclusion of his party's youth wing, the Young Communist League (YCL), in the security plan for the upcoming Constituent Assembly elections, the YCL have shocked the nation, once again, by thrashing the chief district officer of Dolakha.

In what was an out-and-out act of hoodliganism, hundreds of YCL cadres on Sunday attacked and vandalized the Dolakha District Administration Office, forced CDO Uddhav Bahadur Thapa to come out of his office and thrashed him in the presence of dozens of policemen.

The same night, in the far-eastern district of Panchthar, dozens of Maoist cadres vandalized the District Development Committee Office and attacked the residence of Local Development Officer Bhakti Prasad Uprety with the intention to kill him. Uprety was lucky. He was not at his home when the assailants came looking for him.

What happened in Dolakha was largely a recurrence of what the Maoists did in Kanchanpur and Bardiya only a couple of months back. In similar fashion, they had beaten up the CDO of Kanchanpur on May 15 and the acting CDO of Bardiya a few days later. If the CDO, the chief administrator of a district is not safe inside his tight security cordon, who is safe and secure then? What could be the situation of the vast majority of the general public living in the rural and remote areas where there is almost no presence of the state?

Responsible for maintaining law and order, peace and security, CDOs are the state's chief representatives in the districts. Therefore, an attack on them is an attack against the state. And even after joining the peace process, the interim parliament and government, the Maoists have time and again carried out such brazen attacks. Before the beginning of the peace process, they were using guns in a bid to topple the state; and now lathis, khukuris and swords. The means may have changed but the intention has not. The Dolakha episode is the latest evidence of this.

These recent gangster-style activities of the Maoists force us to ask: What are the Maoists up to?

Are they really serious about the peace process? Do they really want the CA elections to be held on the rescheduled date on November 22? Or are they just using the fragile peace process and the fluid "transitional period" to advance their own hidden agenda?

We are afraid the Maoists are trying to do exactly that. Though they are part of the interim parliament and government, these recent events make it clear that they still harbour their long-cherished dream of a stateless situation. And the Young Criminal League seems to have only one aim: do anything, everything, to create a situation of statelessness and total disorder and fish in the troubled waters to push ahead with the hidden agenda.

The Maoist leadership has now no time to lose to realize that the number of those who had either hopefully or reluctantly decided to give the Maoists the benefit of the doubt after they joined the peace process, thinking that the "former rebels" needed some time before they could act and behave within the parameters of a functioning democracy, is fading fast. For the Dolakha and Panchthar incidents are not the first ones where the Maoists have tried to defy, disregard and make defunct the state machinery with aplomb. They have been continuously trying to erode the state authority while enjoying total impunity so far.

But sadly, even three days after the shameful attacks in Dolakha and Panchthar, the Maoist leadership has not said even a single word against it, compelling all peace-loving citizens to believe that they are not honest to the peace process. This is where the real danger lies. The Maoist leadership's failure to condemn these incidents proves that they were carried out as per the party's policies.

Enough is enough. Such violence is not only shameful but also inexcusable. The Dolakha incident, if ignored, will leave an indelible scar on the psyche of the CDOs and civil servants across the country and could have ramifications beyond our imagination. All those arrested for their involvement in the Dolakha attack have to be brought to justice. These acts of sheer impunity have to end now.

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A mission of mystery

DAN EPHRON AND MARK HOSENBALL

FEW things motivate Arab spokesmen more than the chance to condemn Israel. Yet they were subdued when Israeli warplanes flew deep into Syrian airspace earlier this month. The Arab League called the incursion "unacceptable," but most Mideast governments kept quiet.

Their lack of support for Damascus has much to do with Syria's close relationship to Iran, whose rising power they fear. But some Israeli officials and analysts are reading it optimistically, perhaps dangerously so. "You can learn something from it as to how the Arab world might react to an Israeli or American attack against strategic targets in Iran," says Yossi Alpher, a former Israeli intelligence official.

Whatever the Israeli planes

were doing in Syria, Iran's nuclear program -- which Tehran says is peaceful -- couldn't help but loom over their mission. "It's a tacit reminder to Europe and to Washington that if they don't take a tougher action against Iran, Israel may have to do it alone," says Avner Cohen, a nuclear expert and a senior fellow at the United States Institute for Peace.

Details of the Israeli operation remain hazy. Syria's ambassador to the United States told Newsweek the Israeli warplanes dropped munitions in the open desert near Dayr az Zawr before fleeing; he promised his country would retaliate in a manner and at a time of its choosing. "Israel will not be permitted to do whatever it does without paying a price," says Imad Moustapha.

But the unparalleled censorship Israel clamped on the operation has fueled speculation that the target could have been a

missile factory or nuclear technology from North Korea. (Some US intelligence sources say the latter claim is shaky.) The story of the Israeli operation appears to have begun with aerial photographs shot from a spy plane or satellite. A former US official, who asked for anonymity to discuss sensitive matters, told Newsweek that Israel showed the images of a site in northern Syria to a very small group of officials in Washington last month, suggesting it was part of a nuclear project underway with North Korean involvement.

Bush administration neocons have long contended that Damascus was trying to buy nuclear material and that Pyongyang, alleged to have been selling missiles to Syria and Iran since the 1990s, could be a potential supplier. When North Korea issued an unusually loud condemnation of Israel last week, hardliners like former U.N. ambassa-

dor John Bolton read it as possible evidence of Pyongyang's involvement in the matter.

But current and former US intelligence officials, willing to speak only if they were not named, say they've seen no credible evidence yet of nuclear ties between North Korea and Syria, whether before or since the Israeli operation. David Albright, a former weapons inspector in Iraq, says allegations raised by Bolton prompted the International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect Syria's small nuclear research reactor and other sites in 2003.

He says the agency found the claims to be "unsubstantiated." Even Bolton, who served as the State Department's under secretary for arms control and international security, acknowledged to Newsweek that while in government, he never saw proof North Korea was sharing nuclear technology with Syria.

For Israel, the possibility of a nuclear-armed adversary might have been enough to warrant the operation. Officially in a state of war with Syria -- and Iran -- Israel has vowed to let neither country obtain nukes (though Israel itself is believed to have built at least 200 nuclear bombs in its secret Dimona plant). Earlier this year, according to a well-placed Israeli source, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asked President Bush for assurances that if economic and political sanctions failed to get Iran to shut down its nuclear facilities, Bush would order the US military to destroy them before he leaves office.

Bush has yet to provide the assurances, according to the source, who refused to be quoted because he is not authorized to speak for the government. The source says the Israeli government believes the Iranians will reach the point of no return in their

nuclear-enrichment program sometime next year.

US intelligence agencies, by contrast, believe Iran is still two to eight years away from mastering the technology to build a bomb. Some officials warn that attacking Iran would mire U.S. forces in another messy war and might prove ineffective, since the Iranian facilities are believed to be scattered across the country and buried deep underground.

Still, from Israel's perspective, there might never be a more supportive White House. "It makes sense that if Israel has to do it alone, it would want to do it on Bush's watch and not wait to see what the political attitude of the next administration will be," says Alpher. That Arab states, and the world, will look away next time might be too much to assume.

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