

Arrest of militants is a welcome act

The godfathers behind the crime must be apprehended

THE arrest of nine militants allegedly involved in the grisly grenade attacks on an Awami League rally on August 21, 2004 reopens the old question of who planned and executed the diabolical act. It is certainly creditable on the part of the Rapid Action Battalion that its members were able to nab these extremists and thereby give the nation a fresh new opportunity of going into the core of the dastardly incident three years ago.

These new arrests bring to the fore a number of questions that have long been raised by the nation and yet not been answered by those who were at the helm of affairs at the time. The public perception remains that the investigations that were initiated by the BNP-led four-party government were from the beginning hampered by a lack of seriousness on its part. Indeed, there have been suspicions all along that attempts were made to divert the course of the investigations. Included among these diversions was the hauling up of a young man from a cyber café on charges of involvement in the attacks. Sometime later, it was given out that another individual had been nabbed and had in fact confessed to his participation in the plot. And all the while it was made sure that evidence of the crime at the place where the blasts took place was wiped out. Undetonated grenades at the site were swiftly destroyed and within days the whole area was wiped clean, leaving little or nothing for investigators, including those from abroad, to work on. The fact that the government constituted a one-man inquiry commission under Justice Joynal Abedin did not help either because of the perfunctory manner in which the commission worked. It may be noted that the report the commission eventually submitted on the incident was never made public by the Khaleda Zia government.

It is against such a sordid background of inquiry and investigation that the present turn of events causes fresh new hope to arise among the public about a judicious inquiry into the August 2004 attacks. While we are glad that the nine extremists have been arrested, we also realise that the RAB operations to net others involved in the crime will continue. The country must get to the bottom of the entire issue. That point can be reached when the godfathers behind the crime are apprehended and made to face justice.

Construction work turning perilous

Enforcement of safety code urgently needed

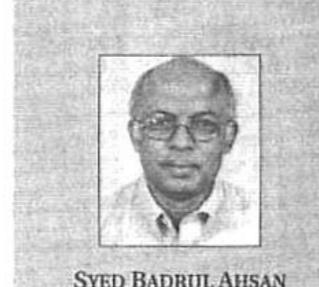
IN this horizontally and vertically growing metropolis construction hyperactivity is a common sight. Apart from heaps of construction materials narrowing down roads and the engineering part causing noise, under-construction buildings have become a veritable source of danger to public life. Workers without safety gears tend to fall from a height losing life or limbs, a pedestrian might be hit lethally by falling brick or a certain broken bamboo panel or scrawny metallic pieces might just have a free fall badly bruising a passerby. Even a surrounding property may be damaged through callous building activities.

Just as the incidence of accidents is seeing a deadly upswing, so also has the negligence on the part of the building owners and virtually non-existing oversight authorities increased by the day. The primary cause for fatalities is put down to non-compliance with Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) formulated as early as in 1993. But not until November 15, 2006 was the BNBC gazetted. The very delay in publishing it in the form of a gazette notification is proof of low priority given to such a matter. Moreover, on being gazetted, the code has now become mandatory for all concerned to be following and enforcing it, but nothing tangible has happened on the implementation front as yet.

The code lays down safety precautions both for construction and demolition of buildings. Apart from providing safety gears to the workers, "protective scaffold is a must at any building construction site for safety of the pedestrians, passers-by and neighbourhood houses".

Public works ministry is supposed to designate an authority and delegate power to a body of officials to supervise under-construction buildings to ensure that their owners comply with laid down safety rules and procedures.

Of "civil war," hypocrisy and ageing quislings



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

GROUND REALITIES

These ageing razakars need comprehensive handling. The proponents of "civil war" in 1971 should not go free. Al-Badr men, some of them senior civil servants today, need to be purged. The crusade that Jahanara Imam began in the early 1990s calls for a revival. Our children, and our children's children, will not be safe in this Bengali republic if the ghosts of Pakistan remain on the prowl in our streets.

to undercut the fabric of society.

Spain went through a murderous civil war in the 1930s. It did not break into pieces because no part of it went into an armed movement for liberation from Madrid. In the 1990s, the murder of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda left the country maimed badly. That was civil war. The country stayed intact.

A civil war does not lead to the break-up of a country. A civil war is resorted to by people who consider themselves part of the same country despite their divergence on the issues. That was not the case with Bengalis in 1971. Back in that year, the Bengali population, having drawn the sad but realistic conclusion that the civil-military bureaucratic complex in Rawalpindi was not about to hand over political power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League, that, indeed, the Pakistan military had already initiated genocidal operations against the people of the country's eastern province, opted to go for a formal declaration of independence.

Beginning on March 26, 1971, therefore, it was all-out war between two states, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of Bangladesh. It was not civil war, for civilian Bengali armed groups were not hounding and killing civilian West Pakistani armed groups, or vice versa. It was not civil war, because a national army had pounced on a population that

considered, for all the right reasons, that army to be a force of occupation in a country struggling for freedom. Hannan's arguments do not stand the test of logic and history.

A civil war begins and ends with a country remaining in one piece. Lebanon has not been sundered in two. Somalia, for all the ugliness of the conflicts eating away at its soul, is still a single country. That has not been true of Pakistan because, in 1971, there was no civil war in Pakistan. In 1971, Pakistan was a foreign occupying power in a fledgling Bangladesh. Hannan knows it. Like others of his kind, he repudiates that knowledge.

You might now raise the matter of Biafra, the eastern Nigerian province that decided in 1967 to go free and give itself a new name. For three years, until 1970, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu's forces fought a gradually losing battle against the armed forces of the federal Nigerian state.

When Biafra collapsed, not many were surprised. Biafra, after all, had tried to secede, for no good political or legal reason, from Nigeria. It was this lack of a moral base that forced Biafra back into the union. In terms of history, therefore, the Biafra conflict is but a version of civil war waged between different segments of the population of a country.

You can go even further back in time, to the 1860s, when the southern states of the United States of

America decided to secede from the north over the question of slavery. They called themselves the Confederate States of America. It was a morally wrong, legally flawed political and military struggle they pursued against their own, and it was doomed to fail. It did fail, in 1865.

Now come closer to modern times. The Indonesian army was spectacularly unable to subdue the people of East Timor into being part of the Indonesian state because the Timorese shared little in terms of culture and politics with Indonesia. The struggle between East Timor and Indonesia was not a civil war. For the Timorese, it was a long, sustained armed movement for political freedom. It was a similar ethos that worked in Bangladesh in 1971.

Move on to another aspect of the issues we happen to wallow in. Some of the leading lights of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jatiya Party have all been reminding us of the sinister role the Jamaat-e-Islami played during our War of Liberation. No one argues with that, for the Jamaat has always operated in dense darkness. It was opposed to the creation of Pakistan. It caused mayhem in Lahore over the Ahmadiyya issue in 1953. And then it gleefully assisted the Pakistani army in shooting and raping Bengalis by the thousands. The shooting would not stop until the tally of the dead reached a hor-

rorific three million. As many as 200,000 women became victims of Pakistani military lust.

Shah Abdul Hannan, in happy agreement with Pakistan and in tones similar to those of World War II Holocaust deniers, says the figure could not have been more than 26,000. We can afford to be dismissive of his point of view. Even so, we ask Hannan: Is it a laughing matter when as many as 26,000 people (a figure he and Pakistan make note of) are murdered by an army?

While he mulls over a possible response, if he at all does, let us go back to the BNP and the JP. These parties have the gall to condemn the Jamaat when it was they who encouraged the re-emergence of the collaborators in the sun. Recall the Zia years. The Collaborators' Order was repealed. The wartime clarion call of Jai Bangla was swiftly banished and replaced by Bangladesh Zindabad.

Air Vice Marshal M.G. Tawab organised a seer conference in Dhaka in 1976 and made it clear into what parochial parameters the country was being pushed. That was Pakistanisation at work. So were the moves in the Ershad period to club this Bengali state into a communal straitjacket, to place a skullcap on Kazi Nazrul Islam, to give the state a religion it could call its own, all in the interest of herding us away from the principles we so clearly upheld between December 1971 and August 1975.

Khondokar Delwar Hossain now informs us, as if we did not already know, who the Pakistani collaborators were in 1971. He does not explain, though, how Motiur Rahman Nizam and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, men we recall parading on the streets of this city in 1971 trying to drum up support for the Pakistani army, came to be ministers in the government led by Khaleda Zia. He says not a word about Shah Azizur Rahman, noth-

ing about the undermining of Bengali nationalism that Zia, Khondokar Abdul Hamid and others promoted through a spurious nationalism, all reminiscent of the old, discredited two-nation theory, they called "Bangladeshis nationalis."

The Jatiyo Party demands a trial of the Jamaatis who helped in the murder and rape of Bengalis. Should that demand not have been raised, and answered, in the days when General Ershad held power? Hypocrisy is but another term for shamelessness. Nizam and Mujahid have little shame when they try to pass themselves and their followers off as innocent little lambs in a long-ago war.

Much a similar degree of shamelessness characterises those who, having been instrumental in the rehabilitation of men who have never had cause to be patriotic Bengalis, have not forgotten Pakistan, and yet now mingle with the millions whose contempt for the old quislings is as pronounced as it was back in 1971.

These ageing razakars need comprehensive handling. The proponents of "civil war" in 1971 should not go free. Al-Badr men, some of them senior civil servants today, need to be purged. The crusade that Jahanara Imam began in the early 1990s calls for a revival. Our children, and our children's children, will not be safe in this Bengali republic if the ghosts of Pakistan remain on the prowl in our streets.

The state is not a social club for those who repudiate it and yet enjoy the creature comforts it provides. It then makes sense to argue that the old collaborators and all the enemies within be dealt with ruthlessly.

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Russian president's visit to Iran



HARUN UR RASHID

BOTTOM LINE

International politics is not only about opportunities but also about the right policies at the right time. It is a diplomatic coup for Iran at a time when Iran feels that its role in the region is being marginalised by the West and, at this point of time, the visit of the Russian President is a "win-win" situation for both the nations.

President Putin's visit to Tehran. It is a part of the disinformation campaign spread by adversaries to spoil Russian-Iranian relations, according to an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman.

In Tehran, the Russian president attended a summit of leaders of Caspian Sea states, which will bring together the sea's five littoral states -- Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

The Caspian Sea is endowed with oil and gas, and the countries want to develop and share the resources equitably. They are expected to make an announcement on a convention determining a new legal status for the resource-rich body of water, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry.

What does Iran want from Russia?

During the visit, he met with

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the powerful spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a rare honour for a visiting non-Muslim dignitary. Observers believe Iran's nuclear program is set to top the agenda. Tehran wants not only diplomatic help in blocking UN sanctions over its refusal to end its controversial nuclear program, but also wants to ensure continued Russian technical assistance.

It is a program that has been dogged by delays, with Moscow claiming that Tehran was behind with its payments, and Iran suspecting that Russia was dragging its feet for political reasons. The government hopes that Mr. Putin will confirm that Moscow will complete the Bushehr nuclear reactor being built by Russian engineers.

President Putin travelled from Germany, where he met with

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and reportedly told her that he was not convinced that Iran was manufacturing nuclear grade uranium. Mr. Putin has called for a peaceful resolution of the dispute, urging the international community to show patience in the matter.

Moscow has, until now, cold-shouldered the effort of the US and other western countries to impose harsher sanctions. It wants to enable the UN's nuclear watchdog, the IAEA, to work with Iran on clearing up outstanding issues.

During the visit, President Putin asserted that Iran had a right to develop peaceful nuclear energy. Furthermore he said that "we should not even think of making use of force in this region."

Why is the Russian president visiting Iran?

There are several reasons, and

some of them deserve mention:

First, Russia has thought it fit to renew its diplomatic influence in the Middle East. Steadily, President Putin has developed good relations with Syria and Iran, the two countries the Bush administration has no dealings with.

It is a golden opportunity for Moscow to counter-balance the domination of the US in the region. Earlier, Russia proposed to restore permanent presence in Syria's Russian naval base that has been empty for years.

Second, with sufficient money in its coffers from oil and gas exports, Russia is more confident than ever about demonstrating its power and influence across the world. President Putin (born in St. Peterburg) has not forgotten Russia's glorious past. Peter the Great ruled Russia, and was respected and feared by European monarchs.

The Soviets equally matched the power of America during the Cold War.

Third, President Putin believes that the time has come for Russia to show the US that unilateralism in international affairs is not acceptable, and multilateralism has come in its place to resolve all

global issues. The Iran visit is an instance in point.

Fourth, Russia, according to some observers, wants to tease the US in visiting a country that is a part of the "axis of evil" for the US. For Russia, the visit is a part of game of power with the US.

Iran has hosted visits of heads of countries who share its antipathy towards the US, such as Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez and Belarus President Aleksander Lukashenko.

But the Russian president's visit to Iran is important for Tehran, even if all its expectations do not come to fruition. It breaks Iran's international isolation from great powers. It demonstrates that Iran is an important country and a regional power.

International politics is not only about opportunities but also about the right policies at the right time. It is a diplomatic coup for Iran at a time when Iran feels that its role in the region is being marginalised by the West and, at this point of time, the visit of the Russian President is a "win-win" situation for both the nations.

Barrister Harun Ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Nepal at crossroads (part 2)

After months of difficult negotiations a major breakthrough was achieved when Prime Minister Koirala on behalf of the government and Prachanda on behalf of the CPN (Maoist) signed the "Comprehensive Peace Agreement" (CPA) on November 21, 2006 in Kathmandu. The agreement formally brought an end to the decade-long "Jana Jodha" and effectively terminated King Gyanendra's direct rule.

MAHMOOD HASAN

CONTINUED FROM OCTOBER 30

B E L A G U E R E D Gyanendra dissolved the parliament on February 1, 2005 and clamped down on the media, seizing all powers to get rid of the civil war once and for all. The army arrested leaders and activists from across the political spectrum. The United States, the European Union and India who were supporting the king's "war against terrorism" suspended all economic assistance and military supplies to the government.

This self-destructive blunder earned the king three clear enemies -- the mainstream parties, the Maoists and a critical international community. On September 3, 2005 the

Maoists declared a three-month unilateral ceasefire to persuade other political parties onto their bandwagon. Secret negotiations took place between the Maoists and the mainstream parties. Then on November 19 the Maoists signed a 12-point agreement with the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) in New Delhi and agreed to form a common front to dislodge the Monarchy.

What was significant is that the Maoists formally committed to join the multi-party stream and work towards a constitutional change in the political system. In other words they renounced their strategy of guerrilla war. It also spoke about the "autocratic monarchy" and termed the king as the hurdle towards achieving democracy. This is the first time the parliamentary parties and the Maoists closed ranks and were pitched against the king. The

Nepalese polity was thus divided into two clear opposing forces -- the king on the one hand and the opposing political parties on the other.

The Delhi agreement had no effect on the conduct of the government, as all powers were concentrated in the hands of the King. The absence of the parliament forced the SPA to stir up agitation. In January 2006 the Maoists ended the four-month unilateral ceasefire. And on April 5, 2006 the Maoist called for general strike across Nepal with a blockade of Kathmandu.

The massive uprising compelled the government to impose a curfew with orders to shoot-at-sight. Thousands of demonstrators defied the government ban and clashed with police making Kathmandu a battlefield -- leaving three people killed. This was a crucial show of strength by the Maoists against the king.

On April 24, the embattled king capitulated -- he relinquished powers and reinstated the parliament. The retreating monarch named octogenarian NCP leader Girija Prosad Koirala the

prime minister. On April 30, Koirala invited Prachanda to Kathmandu for talks and on May 3, Koirala declared a ceasefire and announced that the Maoists will not be treated as "terrorist groups."

The Maoists also declared a three-month truce. Prachanda came to the capital on June 16, 2006 and made his first public appearance in 10 years. After months of difficult negotiations a major breakthrough was achieved when Prime Minister Koirala on behalf of the government and Prachanda on behalf of the CPN (Maoist) signed the "Comprehensive Peace Agreement" (CPA) on November 21, 2006 in Kathmandu. The agreement formally brought an end to the decade-long "Jana Jodha" and effectively terminated King Gyanendra's direct rule.

Maoist negotiations with the mainstream political parties only substantiated the fact that the Delhi agreement was the source for negotiations. Thus the CPA, which was an agreement between the government and the CPN (Maoist), laid the basis for peace -- albeit fragile.

In the two-decade long confrontation the Maoists changed their tactics on several occasions -- realising that they cannot achieve a clear military victory. They realised that they cannot change the political course of Nepal singly -- they needed the conventional parliamentary parties with them.

Besides, the killings had terribly alienated them from the people. Shrewd Koirala capitalised on this particular weakness of the Maoists to bring an end to the bloody insurgency. Koirala of course had to give-in to some major demands of the Maoist to buy that peace.

Among the significant provisions of the CPA were -- a ceasefire, meaning an end of war; management of the Nepalese army and the Maoist army; human rights issue of the people of Nepal; and implementation and monitoring of the agreement. The management of arms was to be done under another agreement known as "Agreement on Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies" signed by the Maoists

and the government on December 8, 2006, and witnessed by the United Nations representative Ian Martin. Under this agreement the Maoist army and the Royal Nepal Army