

Commendable RAB operation in the capital

Extremist structure must be stamped out

THE operation carried out by the Rapid Action Battalion against suspected militants in the capital the other day appears to have yielded yet more information on what religious extremists in the country might still be up to. For RAB, it was certainly commendable to have gone into such a crowded area as the one the alleged militants lived in and neutralise them. We occasionally hear of extremists being apprehended and nabbed along with a good amount of arms and ammunition. It is a sign once again of the degree of alertness that has come into the security forces. Such a relentless pursuit of criminal activities must clearly continue with a view to ensuring peace and security in the country.

In the present instance, it is extremely worrying that the men inside the tin-shed house fought so long and hard with the RAB personnel. The amount of ammunition and apparent skill with which they fought the security forces speak of the supply of arms and intensity of training these men obviously have received from their mentors. A clear message goes out to the authorities from this episode, which is that there are yet points in the capital as well as the rest of the country where extremism continues to be nurtured and promoted in various clandestine ways. That is a big reason why operations against such hideouts need to be intensified in the days ahead. There can be no room for complacency here. The fact that a few ring leaders of the extremists have been tried and hanged ought not to be a reason for anyone to sit back and think that everything is finally well and back to normal.

The point to note is investigations into extremist incidents have hardly ever produced any result, largely because of partisan bias. In the past, investigations had been abandoned halfway through or scuttled when smacking of names of people in power. Recently, the probe into the lethal 21st August bomb blast at the AL rally has been advancing well with new facts coming to light. This process should not be allowed to be obstructed; in fact, it must be carried forward to its logical end.

We believe the occasional apprehension of suspected terrorists or the dramatic capture of armed groups may seem to deal a blow to their cause but they only go to show the tip of the iceberg. And unless they are eliminated root and branch, the vestigial remnants can regroup and multiply. So long as the entire structure of extremist operations is stamped out, we cannot rest easy.

Cash-strapped Sidr victims

NGOs should reinvigorate their lending operations

REPORTS from Patuakhali suggest that with suspension of disbursement of fresh loans by the NGOs, Sidr affected people are falling prey to the hands of moneylenders known as 'mahajans'. Small scale entrepreneurs are borrowing money from traditional lenders at interest rates as high as 15 to 20 percent a month. Most of these borrowers are engaged in poultry, fish and vegetable farming and owning shops. With the coming of the NGO micro-credit operations, the mahajans were on the retreat. In current circumstances, however, money lenders are apparently coming to resurface by exploiting pauperisation in the affected areas. Clearly such a state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue.

NGOs in Bangladesh for long have been famously known both within and outside the country for their micro credit operations in alleviating poverty. Therefore it is they who have to come up with innovative ways of providing fresh loans in addition to what they have already done suspending current loan repayment installments. All they have to do is to simultaneously cut on their operational costs and at the same time call upon their regular donors for additional funding including revising the ongoing project funding.

The prime objective behind micro credit operations of such NGOs like Brac, Grameen Bank, Asa and Uddipon is to provide affordable lending option to the poor free from the tyranny of the mahajans whose interest charges are too high. We are looking forward to the NGOs coming in a big way to reinvigorate their micro-credit operations with the resumption of disbursement of fresh loans on a wider scale.

Finally, it has to be realised that NGOs alone can not cope with the complexities of resumption of fresh loans to the small scale entrepreneurs in the Sidr-hit areas, in addition to their obligations to the rest of the country, despite the fact that they happen to be the most experienced and qualified for the job.

Both commercial banks and specialised financial institutions may come forward in providing loans on easy terms without statutory conditions like matching collaterals.

Pakistan, post-December 16...



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

GROUND REALITIES

No one in the Pakistani military regime appeared before the country on December 16 to report on the calamity that had overtaken the army in Bangladesh. And Pakistan Television, after initially showing images of the surrender in Dhaka, clamped a ban on any further display of such footage. Across Pakistan, in cities like Peshawar, Quetta and Karachi, demonstrations broke out demanding the trial of the leaders of the junta.

Khan and then Niazi had been

squarely beating the Bengalis at any and every game.

IT is time to go back to a recapitulation of history. No, not ours, but that of the state of Pakistan as it was in the days immediately after the emergence of Bangladesh out of the ashes of what used to be East Pakistan. As millions of Bengalis celebrated the surrender of the Pakistan occupation forces at the Race Course in Dhaka on December 16, a state of understandable, perfect gloom descended on what had been till then West Pakistan and was now all that remained of Pakistan.

The state television for sometime flashed images of what was described as the fall of Dhaka. General Amir Abdulla Khan Niazi, who had only days earlier vowed to fight on, who had indeed told the world media at the Dhaka Intercontinental (today's Sheraton) that the city could only be taken over his dead body, was shown signing the instrument of surrender before General Jagit Singh Aurora, commander of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Command.

For Pakistanis across the spectrum, such scenes were a cause for immediate misery and, obviously, anger. In all the months that had gone by since hostilities broke out between their army and the Bengali population of East Pakistan, they had been led to believe that first Tikka

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The next day, December 17, the Indian government called an end to hostilities on the western front, sending a sigh of relief all over Pakistan. Rump Pakistan, after all, would not be broken into further pieces. The same day, late in the evening, President Yahya Khan spoke to Pakistanis over radio and television and showed no contrition over the way events had turned out for the Pakistan army in Bangladesh. He vowed to go on waging a war against the enemy until final victory had been achieved by Pakistan.

Even as he spoke, Pakistan's soldiers, now prisoners of war in Bangladesh, were being herded into camps across the new country under the protection of the Indian army.

And Pakistan's local Bengali collaborators were on the run from the Mukti Bahini and Bangladesh's people. A pro-Pakistan politician was seized by a mob in Dhaka and never seen again.

An academic who had been complicit in the actions of the army

was beaten and left for dead on a street in central Dhaka. In Rawalpindi, a clutch of Bengali politicians who had arrived in November to be part of new political arrangements with Yahya Khan found themselves stranded and without a country to go back to. Nurul Amin, named prime minister in early December, suddenly did not matter any more. Mahmud Ali and Raja Tridiv Roy knew that having collaborated with the regime, they had nowhere to go.

In the four days between December 16 and December 20, Pakistanis in general and young military officers in particular made it clear that they wanted Yahya Khan and his regime to go. At one point, General Abdul Hamid Khan, chief of staff of the Pakistan army (the army was then headed by a commander-in-chief, in this case Yahya), called a meeting of army officers in Rawalpindi cantonment and attempted to explain the causes behind the debacle in Bangladesh.

He was greeted with expletives, one more profane than the next, and eventually was forced to leave the room. Hamid, who had after the Dhaka surrender begun nurturing ambitions of taking over from Yahya, now knew that the end was near. Officers like General Gul Hasan, in contact with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, were already planning to dominate the new circumstances.

In effect, President Yahya Khan was informed in no unambiguous terms that he had to quit. And to whom would power be transferred in that case? Evidently, at that point, the one man who mattered was Bhutto, then in New York, having presented the case for Pakistan as his country's new deputy prime minister and foreign minister. For his part, Bhutto assessed conditions from afar and would not return until he was certain he could feel safe in Pakistan. He had already entertained the United Nations Security Council with his histrionics by tearing up what looked like a copy of a ceasefire resolution, and leaving the hall through telling the global diplomats present there that he would not be a party to the dismemberment of Pakistan.

Bhutto arrived back in Rawalpindi around noon on December 20, and was immediately whisked away to the president's house for a meeting with General Yahya Khan. He emerged a few hours later as Pakistan's new president and, incongruously, chief martial law administrator. Late in the evening, President Bhutto addressed the nation, and in a rambling speech promised his people that he would build a new Pakistan for them. He extolled the bravery of Pakistan's soldiers in the just concluded war and asked for forgiveness of his "brothers and sisters" in East Pakistan.

He showed absolutely no contrition over his role in the making of the crisis in Bangladesh but appeared to reassure Pakistanis that their future was safe in his hands. He placed Yahya Khan under house arrest and appointed new chiefs of staff for the army, air force and navy. Two days later, on December 22, as Bangladesh's provisional government arrived in Dhaka from exile, Bhutto decreed that detained Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman be moved from solitary confinement in prison to house arrest.

Mujib, who had declared Bangladesh's independence in March before his arrest by the Pakistan army, had been tried before a secret military tribunal in Lyallpur and sentenced to death on charges of treason. He and Bhutto had not met since the army crackdown in Dhaka, but, on December 27, Pakistan's new leader arrived at the rest house where Mujib had been moved.

As the Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar would later report in his book, *Distant Neighbours: A Tale of the Subcontinent*, a surprised Mujib asked Bhutto: "Bhutto, how are you here?" Bhutto's response did not fit the question: "I am president of Pakistan." An even more surprised Mujib teased him: "But you know that position belongs to me." He was evidently referring to the Awami League's victory at the general elections of a year earlier. This time Bhutto told him: "I am also chief martial law administrator."

In the next hour or so, Bhutto gave Mujib to understand that the Indian army had occupied "East Pakistan" and that the two men needed to be together in the coming struggle to drive the Indians off. Mujib, ever the astute politician, knew better.

Evening lengthened into cold night on January 8, 1972, as President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto accompanied Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Chaklala airport. As the plane carrying Bangladesh's founding father to freedom flew off into the dark and towards London, Bhutto said to no one in particular, "The nightingale has flown."

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Emergency's ugly children



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PLAIN WORDS

The country happens to be polarised between this semi-foreign, semi-comprador regime on the one hand, and a growing number of Pakistanis on the other. This is not a violent confrontation from people's side. It is the regime that is likely to instigate people to violence so they can be crushed with the greater state violence. The leaders of civil society's movement can only ask the people to remain non-violent and use arguments. When this confrontation will mature and come to a head cannot be foreseen because much depends on authority's behaviour.

EMERGENCY has ended, but not before it had done its work: amended the constitution further; the president can do without the usual Indemnity Act to validate his illegal and unconstitutional acts; the judiciary has been purged, and at least one troublesome judge has probably been exiled. Such measures have completed the framework within which 2008 elections will be held.

One had occasion to suggest in this space that "agencies" have honed the art and craft of "managing" elections. All elections since 1970 were efficiently rigged. There is no reason to suppose that the January 8 elections will produce results that can surprise the powers that be. And which are these powers?

While there is no uncertainty about the locals' identity: one person and one institution, viz. ex-Gen Musharraf and the Pakistani army. There is now no pretence of sovereignty; all the shots are being called by the US and its friends in the Middle East and Europe, ably implemented by collaborators in Pakistan, Musharraf and the army.

And Americans have said it: speaking before a Congressional committee, the US Under Secretary of State Richard Boucher has declared: "The January 8, 2008,

elections in Pakistan will not be perfect." Who should know better? Pakistanis, voters or abstainers, should expect the results desired by these powers that be.

The people will scarcely be convinced of the official results, or that they can lead to resolution of major problems. Who can miss the significance of Musharraf's November 3 actions? He wanted to sack an assertive judiciary, and he has all but succeeded. His other purpose of the November 3 actions was to browbeat and cow down the media, electronic and the press.

He has succeeded here, too. These are preparations for January 8 elections. He saw the Pakistani people to be politically unaware and docile, who regard the government as the ultimate power -- quite like fate.

The point that needs to be made is that times are changing even in Pakistan. Blind would be the man who cannot see the changes wrought by the 9 months' lawyers' and civil society's movement. The common people, poor and unlettered though they may be, have clearly shown their preferences.

They do understand why

Musharraf tried to sack Mr. Justice Ifthikar Muhammad Chaudhry, and what he intends doing. The awe and

fear of authority has not disappeared, but is distinctly less. The docility and ignorance are also considerably less than before. In many ways, it is a new Pakistan.

Powers that be must be told that the consequences of ignoring true popular wishes, and pretending that people would accept all schemes of retired Gen. Musharraf, is a dangerous delusion. An un-free election is a fraud, and nobody likes to be fooled. A price will have to be paid for defrauding the people: holding an election and producing results that voters did not want can only make them angry. They would listen to the opponents of Musharraf, and the parties that supported him will receive appropriate punishment.

Shouldn't authority be afraid of the disappointment and anger of the people? The military has dominated Pakistan's politics for 55 years. All variations on the theme have been seen: Martial laws, military-controlled civilian governments, and now Musharraf's regime that has finally showed where everyone stands: subjects of President Musharraf, who is the viceroy of the United States of America.

This is a clear, and perhaps final, reversion to the colonial period. The US-Pak army condominium is surely

a slavery. One way or another, the lawyers' and civil society's movement is objectively a national liberation movement.

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But there are other considerations. The regime is likely to work out a deal with JUI in the hope that a modus vivendi can be evolved with the Taliban and other extremists through the good offices of Maulana Fazlur Rehman. The Americans and the Pakistani army are no strangers to Taliban; they have worked together before. Insofar as anyone can decipher, the immediate American aim in Afghanistan is bound to be to seek a deal with Taliban with the help of Pakistani generals and religious

elements.

On that flickering hope depends the solution of the Pakistan army's problems in Fata and other NWFP areas. Whether this will succeed is hard to say. It is not easy after all the bloodshed and the pervasive anti-American sentiment not only in the Afghanistan and Pushtoon belts in Pakistan but also in Pakistan.

Pakistanis who do not share the military's illusions do not see Islamic extremism subsidising in Pakistan through such schemes. Islamic extremism is a distortion of certain ideas about Islam and cannot be removed or killed with guns. It can be replaced with other ideas. No gun has been invented that can kill an idea.

Behind the popularity of Islamic extremism lie social and economic conditions in which the people are forced to live amidst much backwardness and poverty. These conditions make them lose hope, and prone to accept extremist ideas. Is it too difficult to appreciate that popularity of extremist ideas can be countered or diluted with economic development that actually confers concrete improvement to the people's lives?

No one will ever cease to be Muslim. Only, he can, under favourable social and economic conditions, be more tolerant of other views and even of dissent. After all, these areas were once Buddhist. During the Islamic period, most of their thinking was heavily influenced by Sufi poets. Given a true democratic dispensation -- that delivers concrete benefits to citizens -- not only dissent will be tolerated but other religions and cultures will also be tolerated.

How to create a democratic dispensation where people matter and their problems are resolved through combined official and popular

actions? Would the election that agencies will manage create a democratic dispensation? Insofar as anyone can see, Pakistan would get governments like those that followed the mysterious death of Gen. Ziaul Haq, in which the troika -- army chief, president and PM representing parliament -- ruled.

The prime minister's house's gate became a revolving door; five prime ministers marched in and out in 11 years. Every change was some kind of a putsch executed indirectly by the then army chief. That is not a thrilling prospect. This time around, Mr. Musharraf has written new constitutional measures to ensure his continuation in office. This prospect can only make the civil-military polarisation worse.

Meanwhile, let's not forget the economic situation: the food inflation is playing havoc; other inflations are bound to increase. The economy is actually threatened with eventual meltdown. The export drive is fizzing out, with the manufacturing sector faltering and agriculture semi-stagnant and a victim of the private sector's racketeering.

Fiscal deficit is growing as much as the current account, and so is the foreign debt rising. All the old ills -- over-consumption, too small savings and fewer investments, and too low tax-GDP ratio are back. Direct taxation of the rich has been eschewed, while the state's entire burden has been put on poorer sections. This cannot go on.

Debt servicing burden is increasing despite the relief expatriate Pakistanis are providing. Unless these imbalances and deficits are rectified, the economic future is bleak. It will be far more conducive to political agitation that may arise from election results.

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Gaining duty free access to the US market

Naturally, there must be a great deal of support. Apart from the government's own directions to the Embassy, valuable guidance can come from BGMEA and from the lobbyist. The lobbyist can help to frame the arguments and to gain access, but cannot define the policy -- that is the details of the duty free access. This is the responsibility of the Bangladesh government. The Bangladeshi resident in the United States can communicate with their Congressmen to vote for the bill, but one must first get legislation that is really helpful to Bangladesh. The government needs to aggressively negotiate with the authors of the bill to seek adjustments to achieve Bangladesh's purpose.

FORREST COOKSON

FOR many years the holy grail of Bangladesh's trade policy has been to achieve duty free access to the United States apparel market. The attempts go back a decade but have not been successful. Now there is a bill in the House of Representatives that, if passed, would provide considerable relief for Bangladesh apparel exports. This bill is called the "New Partnership for Development Act" and provides a

partial solution for Bangladesh, improving competitiveness by avoiding some of the duties charged on apparel. (In the language of the American Congress a bill is a piece of legislation that has not yet been passed by the Congress; an act is legislation that has been passed.) While the draft of the bill in its present form has several points that reduce its useful impact for Bangladesh, there is room for negotiation and for adjustment of policies at the embassy. Valuable guidance can

come from BGMEA and from the lobbyist. The lobbyist can help to frame the arguments and to gain access, but cannot define the policy -- that is the details of the duty free access. This is the responsibility of the Bangladesh government. The Bangladeshi resident in the United States can communicate with their Congressmen to vote for the bill, but one must first get legislation that is really helpful to Bangladesh. The government needs to aggressively negotiate with the authors of the bill to seek adjustments to achieve Bangladesh's purpose. It is essential to undertake this immediately. The policy with respect to the draft bill must be faced squarely, and decisions made on what are feasible to try to change and if the rest can be managed.

What are the issues in the draft bill? What does this draft bill say about duty free access?

The bill provides for duty free