

Mosque blast in Pakistan

Uglier face of militancy

THE bomb blast in a mosque in Peshawar that left 50 people killed and scores injured has sent shock waves throughout the world. No one in a sensible state of mind can comprehend anyone spilling blood of innocent devotees in a prayer house, that again on the Eid day. The mindless act was disrespect for religion of the worst kind and deserves condemnation in strongest of words. What is more distressing is the fact that introduction of suicide attacks on soft targets for attaining political gains will have added a new but dangerous dimension to the strife-ridden politics in Pakistan.

Preliminary investigation following the blast has fingers pointed at some extremist religious groups who are believed to hold grudges against President Pervez Musharraf, and Mr Aftab Sherpao, the top security official in Pakistan. There is a strong possibility that he has been targeted for coming down too heavily in his attempts to purge the mountainous areas of the heavily armed militants. But there is also the whisper in the air that he could have been on the hit list for announcing his name as a candidate for the next parliamentary election. And while making public its reaction, the US government said that al-Qaeda had focused on attacking the Pakistani government.

Ironically, the suicide bombing came within a week after President Musharraf had lifted the state of emergency saying that the threats from Islamic militants have been contained. It has also come at a time when the administrative machinery in Pakistan has been gearing up for a general election in January 2008. Apparently the fringe groups are out to destroy the morale of the people, especially voters, so that it does not ensure the government a smooth sailing through the election.

The proliferation of the armed militants in Pakistan is a phenomenon the present and future governments will have to face squarely. These groups have found allies not only within the country but also in some neighbouring countries and the fact that two Afghans have been arrested along with some students from an Islamic seminary not far from the mosque provides valuable insight into the matter. Pakistan will have to look for enemies of Islam within rather than without and hence the present government will have to take a whole new strategy to pave the way for democracy through national reconciliation.

Time for a shift to food for work

Some people are becoming hooked to relief

Five weeks have passed since cyclone Sidr devastated eleven districts in the southwestern part of the country. All this while our handling of the aftermath has been relief-centred, even though we should have by now plunged headlong into rehabilitation work.

Three things are indicated by our preoccupation with relief even at this stage: one, we couldn't expeditiously reach the four corners of the affected areas with succour; two, there has been repeat distribution of relief to some people at the expense of others; and three, gaps remaining in terms of the outreach, relief work should have a realistic cut-off date.

The net result of all this happens to be the handout dependency in many parts of the affected areas. We have reports from districts of people going for relief hunt setting aside their daily chores of mending their fences or otherwise nurturing the ground for cultivation. In this scenario, there is an acute dearth of agriculture labour. Time is fast running out for planting Boro. Whereas they get a hundred taka as daily remuneration by working in the land they can earn as much as four to five hundred taka from scrounging relief from different sources. This is partly the reason why compensatory agriculture or rehabilitation work is not getting underway in full swing.

We see three possible ways of turning a corner. Firstly, all logistical support like agricultural inputs, production implements and seed money will have to be delivered to the affected people to bring them back to work. Secondly, where distribution of relief material like food, medicines, drinking water is unavoidable, it should be continued for some more specified time but only in kind not in cash. Thirdly, all routes to black-marketing of relief goods will have to be sealed as pilferage and corruption are eliminated.

Actually, an answer to dependency on handouts lies in extending food for work programme. It must be extensively utilised as a vehicle in realising the productive potential of people.

Governance, police reforms and all that



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

STRAIGHT LINE

While on the subject of reform and good governance, it may be relevant to take a close look at our police organisation. The force is nationally organised. Every effort is made to ensure that local ties are neither sustained nor created, and, ideally, the recruits of the national police force are unmarried, stationed in barracks, trained to obey orders unquestioningly, and view the local population with suspicion. Their uniform is military in appearance, and they are always conspicuously armed.

THE caretaker government has taken a number of important steps with a view to facilitating good governance. Good governance, by all accounts, would mean satisfactory performance of those regulatory outfits whose activities have a direct bearing on the keeping of peace and preservation of order. Viewed in this light, the significance of streamlining the enforcement administration, particularly the police, can hardly be over-emphasised.

One has to remember that the thrust of public sector reform is to improve public services and reduce costs. There is an emphasis on the notion of privatisation. However, the role of the police in preserving peace is unlikely to be put out to contract by even the most ardent advocate of privatisation. Of course, that does not obviate the imperative of seeking public cooperation to solve crimes.

It is time to once again remind ourselves that reforms in the enforcement segment must make it a point to ensure that we turn police into an organisation that enforces the law at the implicit wish of society so as to make legitimate government effective.

The conduct of the police should be such that a reasonable person would approve of it, given the circumstances prevailing at the time the action was carried out; and, in addition to being answerable to his senior officers for his actions, the reformed police shall invariably be accountable to the law.

The above imperative has been repeated because it has been our unfortunate experience to witness a police force which simply enforced the wishes of the government, or the party, for whom the rule of law has not been a respected principle.

We need to remember that where the government suffers from a legitimacy problem, the role of police will be to suppress dissent rather than enforce law.

While on the subject of reform and good governance, it may be relevant to take a close look at our police organisation. The force is nationally organised. Every effort is made to ensure that local ties are neither sustained nor created, and, ideally, the recruits of the national police force are unmarried, stationed in barracks, trained to obey orders unquestioningly, and view the local population with suspicion.

Their uniform is military in appearance, and they are always conspicuously armed. There is an officer class, chosen largely for their political background and loyalty rather than their officer-like qualities.

The first purpose of our paramilitary police force is to support the state; therefore, their primary role is a political one. The state, rather than the law, is supreme; and the major enemy of the police is the political subversive rather than the criminal.

Under the system, it is a legitimate and, indeed, a desirable activity of the police to gather information of all kinds, and the ordinary, law-abiding citizen is no more entitled to privacy than the inveterate plotter or reckless villain.

Historically speaking, the police organisation in the Indo-Pak subcontinent evolved principally in response to the political realities of the times. Enforcement of law and maintenance of order under the system designed by the British were the dual responsibilities of the executive magistracy and the police.

Police was placed under the general control and direction of the district magistrate in violation

of the universally accepted principles of unity of command and separation of powers.

The system worked well from the standpoint of clearly perceived objectives of colonial rule. Rule of law was an objective, but was understandably subordinate, in the ultimate, to the demands of "order." As there was no day-to-day conflict between the dictates of justice and the interests of order, it was possible to achieve significantly high levels of both law and order.

The system that had worked reasonably well during the colonial era started faltering after the British left the subcontinent in August 1947. It failed because its design was inappropriate. It had no built-in checks against the forces that were legitimately unleashed by the political processes in the wake of freedom from colonial rule.

The basic objective of this design was to give an instrument in the hands of the government to control the natives. Service to the people was not the objective of this design.

Historically, policing in south Asia has been, by and large, a one-sided affair, with communities having no or little say in local

policing plans and strategies that affect them the most. The idea that police are people and people are police has not taken root in the region.

Understandably, the Police Act 1861 was silent on the issue of community consultation. Rather, it focused on the responsibility of communities to ensure order, and should any member step out of line the whole community would face vicarious punishment.

To be realistic, we have to admit that an outmoded administrative legacy is undermining reform supported by many national and international expert missions. For too long, the basic functioning of police has remained unchanged. What is needed is to make improvement of the quality of law enforcement a permanent and integral part of the national agenda, regardless of which party is in power.

There is growing recognition that the task requires a concerted effort by all concerned -- the state, the private sector and civil society. Without enduring partnership and coalition building among the principal actors involved, there can be no hope of significant police reform.

An enlightened and determined political leadership, high levels of public support, and a motivated and well-led private sector are absolutely critical for making a change. Equally, or even more importantly, a civil society that demands and supports higher and better standards of police performance is a must for this design.

Historically, policing in south Asia has been, by and large, a one-sided affair, with communities having no or little say in local

time on the rhetoric of police reform. If the organisation designed to carry out reform is incapacitated, the rhetoric alone won't take us anywhere.

If the vehicle won't move, it hardly matters which direction we point it; we won't get there. Today, the core issue is not so much what the police does, but why it does what it does. It is time to make the police work for the people.

The police-reform debate seems to be attracting a wider and more serious audience. The issues are receiving focused and continuing attention in the media. Let us hope that, rather than giving rise to arguments and attitudes that have often in the past confused the real issues, created bad blood and hindered objective thinking, it is possible to address this vital subject more dispassionately, and strictly in accordance with the dictates of public interest.

The citizens of Bangladesh will hope that their police act as a service and not a force, although they must be prepared to use legitimate and requisite force on occasion. They must be clear in their main purpose, and recognise that they also fulfil several ancillary roles.

They must be able to lead the public in some ways, and follow in others. They must remember the distinction between society and state; and between state and government. The police service is there to uphold the law; it is not responsible for making it. Too close an identification between the police and the government of the day will bring trouble for the police.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist contributor to The Daily Star.

Double or quits?


 IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

AS I SEE IT

These leaders tend to be claimants of more than double the seats which they would normally win. Do they do this in everything? One would be prudent to reduce by half whatever they say about themselves, and, by that analogy, about others.

ACCORDING to Ms. Benazir, the PPP will win 150 NA seats in the Jan 8 elections. This magic "150" figure has also been confidently claimed by both Mian Nawaz Sharif for PML (N) and Ch. Shujaat Hussain for PML (Q). The grand total of 450 NA seats claimed by the three leaders exceeds by a cool 178 the 272 NA seats being contested.

Given that MQM, MMA (represented by JUI (F) and three other religious parties), ANP, the 8 or 9 political parties in Balochistan which usually win 1 or 2 seats each, and independents all over the country will manage 50-55 seats between them, leaving a maximum of about 220 seats between the three major parties, which is less than half being claimed by them.

These leaders tend to be claimants of more than double the seats which they would normally win. Do they do this in everything? One would be prudent to reduce by half whatever they say about themselves, and, by that analogy, about others.

Even though the caretaker government can hardly influence the elections in the short time available, with the officials of the EC, public officials, as well as

police on duty at the polling stations, and the Local Bodies infrastructure personnel in place, the perception of partiality very much exists.

Supporting them will be the various intelligence agencies, the interference by their personnel being directly proportional to the priority given to each candidate.

All parties claim to be "holier-than-thou," wherever they can get away with ballot stuffing or intimidation they will do so. Local electoral skulduggery in every constituency is not only at the behest of the government, in many cases the influence of the candidate in his constituency, whatever his party affiliation, will be the measure of fraud being perpetrated.

Technically Nazims, Naib Nazims etc. do not belong to any party, but this is a patent farce, nearly all of them have party affiliation and are capable of influencing the elections for their favourites at the polling booth. There is a strong case for suspending the Local Bodies for the duration of the elections, or even dissolve them.

Approximately 220-230 seats will be shared between PPP, PML (N) and PML (Q). More than half (about 130) of these would be won

by the candidates irrespective of their party affiliation, or rigging and manipulation.

As such, there are actually about 80-90 constituencies where official or unofficial manipulation can overturn the people's choice.

An overwhelming number of these (around 70) are in the Punjab, here PERM is poised to commit electoral fraud (mostly to the detriment of PML (N) (40 seats) and PPP (25 seats), to paraphrase President Musharraf's words about Jan 8 (admittedly in a different context), "come hell or high water!"

The best effort of PERM may not succeed everywhere; PML (N) may lose 20, and PPP about 10, seats. Rigging notwithstanding (given that it cannot be eliminated altogether), PPP should get 80-85 seats, PML (N) 75-80 and PML (Q) 70-75.

Independent observers and the media should focus on those constituencies where electoral fraud is most likely. Ballot stuffing, etc. will not be widespread in all polling stations but will happen in selected ones; "target" stations can be earmarked with the help of candidates.

Those who commit irregularities know this and will attempt to avoid (or deflect) any focus. The independent observers and media should, therefore, maximise their presence in the 80-90 constituencies where electoral manipulation is most likely, coordinating deployment of mobile teams (kept in reserve) to those polling stations where electoral fraud is reported. This may not totally prevent misdemeanours, but will certainly act as a deterrent to widespread rigging.

Those inimical to Pakistan have spent tons of money and effort in a well-coordinated multi-directional, multi-disciplinary effort. One does not normally subscribe to conspiracy theories, but this one had too much smoke for a fire not to be present. The NEWSWEEK article declaring Pakistan "the most dangerous place on Earth" was the crowning piece.

If we are to take what some of the international media says to be the gospel truth, countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Somalia, Sudan, etc. rank far below us. The 70 districts in India (nearly 12% of the total districts, 18% of the population) where 1,00,000 or so Naxalites (who call themselves terrorists) collect revenue instead of the government do not seem to count!

Despite the fact that the army contingents (less the intelligence personnel on duty with various agencies) remain some distance from the polling booth and have nothing to do with ballot stuffing, etc., their presence in the vicinity means the stage is set for them to

be set upon internationally and domestically for the misdeeds of others.

What steps is the military hierarchy taking to ensure that this perception is not reinforced after the Jan 8 election? Instead of being "fall guys" and remaining a recurring part of the problem, it is time to look for permanent solutions for the sake of the uniform.

Whether there is a fair election or a rigged one, only the numbers will change. There will be a hung parliament; and whatever Ms. Benazir may profess at the moment, her party is poised to come into an alliance with the PML (Q) at the Federal level and in Punjab. This will leave the PML (N), which will be the majority party in the Punjab, out in the cold.

This leaves Pervez Musharraf very much in place, ruling the roost as a "civilian" president; does he really need to go in for overkill? The bad news is that a straw poll conducted among those who know him well for over four decades concluded that he was incapable of letting go; it is not in his personality profile to stay above the fray.

Loyalty is a two-way street; for having him elected as a "civilian" president, Musharraf owes the army loyalty in return. What better way for him to express this loyalty than to ensure free and fair elections so that the army's image and reputation is not sullied anymore.

Ikram Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.

The unimportance of polls


 KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

BETWEEN THE LINES

Even after the managed polls, Musharraf will remain at the top with all the powers, including the charge of nuclear weapons. This is why the exercise of elections makes little sense. The parties will only lend credibility to the polls. They may come to regret for having done so. True, Benazir has warned that rigged elections may lead to a civil war and the balkanization of the country. But her warning may not be heeded.

POLITICAL parties in Pakistan began with the demand for restoration of democracy but ended up by accepting elections, which they know will not be free or fair. In fact, a US source has said that the polls have already been rigged. Electoral rolls are said to have been fudged.

Candidates have reportedly been sieved through a mechanism supervised by the army. The Election Commission, presiding over all arrangements, is considered partisan. The ballot box security and the counting are still in the realm of conjecture. In the face of such charges, the election has a question mark against it.

Benazir Bhutto, chairperson of

Pakistan People's Party (PPP), may be more to blame than Nawaz Sharif for not agreeing to a common charter. But he, the president of the Muslim League (N), too, came along.

Benazir wanted to be the prime minister. Nawaz Sharif's reasoning was that he could not persuade his party, which was preparing itself to go into action after having remained in the wilderness for some eight years.

Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam chief Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who was out of tune, was at least honest. He said from day one that he would never boycott the polls. His reasoning was that "elections in Pakistan

to join hands to save our motherland from the clutches of military dictatorship."

I pin my hopes on the lawyers, who were successful in having Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry reinstated. They are the ones who are continuing their agitation for a tolerant, liberal, democratic and pluralistic Pakistan. This class, not normally associated with braving the police excesses and confinement to jail, is holding the standard of defiance aloft.

The lawyers may ultimately put the political parties to shame, and force them not to pick up the few loaves of power thrown at them. The lawyers have redeemed the country's honour.

It is sad to see that Musharraf has got away with the imposition of emergency and the dismissal of judges, including Chief Justice Chaudhry. This is because the people did not come out in the streets. They were probably awaiting the call by the party leaders who were busy counting what they would gain personally.

Hats off to Aitzaz Ahsan, who has led the lawyers' agitation and has

withdrawn his nomination papers. Pakistan has found in him a leader whose integrity is above board, and who is acceptable all over Pakistan.

I have no doubt that he would be able to find space -- probably a new party -- for himself and persons like him if they do not compromise with feudal elements which still dominate the Pakistani society.